

“Three Beauties” Principle in the English Versions of “Jing Ye Si”—Translations by Xu and Fletcher as Examples

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“Jing Ye Si” is a classical poem with international influence by the Chinese poet Li Bai in the Tang Dynasty, which expresses the poet’s deep nostalgia. This paper compares and analyzes its two English versions translated by the Chinese translator Xu Yuanchong and the British translator W. J. B. Fletcher based on the “three beauties” principle (beauty in sense, beauty in sound, and beauty in form), and discovers that the English version of Xu basically achieves the unity of the “three beauties”, while the English version of Fletcher realizes the “beauty in sound and form”, but deviates from the “beauty in sense” mainly owing to the inaccurate comprehension of the moon as an image and other factors. This analysis may afford us with certain reference in poetry translation.

Keywords: “Jing Ye Si”, “three beauties” principle, comparative analysis, translation

Introduction

“Jing Ye Si”, “the jewel of five-word stanzas”, is one of the masterpieces by Li Bai who is a distinguished romantic poet in the Tang Dynasty and praised as the “Poetry Immortal” by later generations. This poem reflects the nostalgia of a traveler. The first two lines write about the illusion that the protagonist creates for a moment in the specific environment of being a guest away from home, and the last two lines deepen the protagonist’s homesickness through the portrayal of actions and gestures. The whole poem deploys metaphor, description of similar or opposite things as background for contrast, and other rhetorical techniques. The poem is concise, with no lavish imagery, ornate language, or historical allusions, but embodies sincere feelings, far-reaching influence and significance.

The background of the poem is considerably complex. Around 773 A.D., Li Bai was already a noted poet at that time, having sat for the court’s literary exams several times, and was highly appreciated by the Tang emperor and court literati. Nevertheless, Li Bai had also been summoned by the emperor for inappropriate remarks and had been fined and detained several times. At the time of composing “Jing Ye Si”, Li Bai was in a more depressed state. His father had passed away and he had lost his official position for political causes. Li Bai was compelled to wander, lonely and isolated, and felt that hope in his life was fading. This poem expresses Li Bai’s longing for his homeland. He describes his loneliness and isolation in curt words and expresses his longing for loved ones.

This poem has high literary value in terms of lexical usage, the status of poetry and emotions. Chinese scholars, such as Xu Yuanchong, Xu Zhongjie, and Weng Xianliang and British writer W. J. B. Fletcher,

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British sinologist H. A. Giles, and British poet Witter Bynner have offered different English translations of it. This paper will take “three beauties” principle as the basis for a comparative study of two English versions of the poem by Xu Yuanchong (1984a) and Fletcher (1922), with a view to discover the strategies for poetry translation.

“Three Beauties” Principle

The “three beauties” principle was proposed by the celebrated Chinese translator Xu Yuanchong in a letter to Zhu Guangqian in 1979, and had exerted significant impacts in the academia of translation. Xu (2012, p. 83) believed that the literary translation theory of the Chinese school originates from the thoughts of Laozi and Confucius. The contradiction between “faith” and “beauty” and that between “name” and “reality” as proposed by Laozi has partly evolved into the contradiction of the three beauties (beauty in sense, sound, and form).

Zeng (2012, p. 247) held that in Xu’s principle, “Reproducing the original meaning is the highest state of literary translation followed by beauty in sound and finally beauty in form”. According to Wang (2014), “three beauties” principle is proposed on the premise of inheriting and carrying forward the Chinese translation tradition which naturally requires the embodiment of “beauty in sense, sound and form” in translation.

This principle is applicable to poetry translation (Lv & Liu, 2015). According to Wan (2010, p. 365), “Poetry, as a literary genre with high artistic and aesthetic value, is the essence of human culture and a high art of language, which emphasizes musical beauty, formal beauty, and artistic conception”. Xu’s “three beauties” principle advocates conveying the original language from the facets of sound, form, and sense, and particularly capturing the essence of poetry. Therefore, translators must reproduce the “beauty in sense” of the original text while balancing “beauty in sound” and “beauty in form”. Xu views literary translation as a process of creating beauty, with the emphasis on seeking beauty in translation art (Zhu, 2023). Xu believes that translated poems should be able to touch the readers’ hearts as the original poems do, which is the “beauty in sense”; they should have pleasant and melodious rhymes as the original poems do, which is the “beauty in sound”; and they also should keep the form of the original poems as much as possible, which is the “beauty in form”. It seems that in his translation of poetry, the principle of “beauty-seeking” is prioritized over “truth-seeking”. Xu (1998, p. vi) further explained that when translating poetry, “truth-seeking” is a low standard and “beauty-seeking” is a high standard. Translation should be “truth-seeking” while poetry should be “beauty-seeking”. If the translated poem can be both true and beautiful, it is naturally the best, but if not both, the “beauty in sense, sound and form” of the original poem should be conveyed as much as possible under the condition of not losing the truth. On account of Xu’s views, in the process of translating poetry, the pursuit of “truth” and “beauty” is not in conflict, and the pursuit of “beauty” ensures the “truth” of the original poem to a certain extent.

In addition to the issue of “truth-seeking” or “beauty-seeking” in translation, Xu also highlights the notion of “translation as an art”. Xu (1984b) pointed out that literary translation is similar to creation and a favorable translation amounts to or even surpasses creation; therefore, literary translation embodies the spirit of creation. Zhu (2018) further elaborated that artistry is the minimum requirement for literary translation, since it is indispensable to fully utilize linguistic devices, to make the best of the translated language, and to elevate the translated language to the creation status.

Therefore, for literary translation, especially poetry translation, there is a necessity to achieve “beauty-seeking” and concentrates on creation. A consummate combination of content and form of what is expressed in

the original text is required to convey the beauty of the poem to the readers in its entirety, and if any part of it is missing, it is destined to become crippled.

Comparative Analysis of English Translations of “Jing Ye Si”

Based on “three beauties” principle, the two English translations of “Jing Ye Si” by Xu and Fletcher are analyzed and compared.

1. The translation by Xu (1984a, p. 35):

“A Tranquil Night”

A bed, I see a silver light, I wonder if it’s frost aground.

Looking up, I find the moon bright, Bowing, in homesickness I’m drowned.

In general, Xu’s translation effectively achieves a high degree of unity of “beauty in sense, sound, and form”. Li and Zhang (2016, p. 36) clearly illustrate that Xu translates the title as “A Tranquil Night”, which offers people a peace and tranquility, and at the same time, it also empowers the readership to imagine and think. Moreover, for the title, Xu does not literally use the word “Thoughts”, but allows readers to experience the sentiment of a quiet night by themselves, which, on the contrary, emphasizes the beauty of the original poem’s artistic conception, offering people a picturesque feeling, as if we were placed in the scene.

In the first line “A bed, I see a silver light”, Xu uses “a silver light” to depict the moonlight, and he does not specify that it is the light of the moon, but only tells us that it is a ray of silver, and the word “silver” also gives off a cool vibe, which makes the translation more mysterious and full of artistic flavor. In the second line, the word “wonder” is accurately chosen; the actions of looking at a white patch of moonlight and imagining, it is frosted not only help to accomplish an equivalence in meaning, but also present us with a wonderful image. The third and fourth lines seem to demonstrate to us the picture in which Li Bai is standing in front of his bed, looking at the moon outside the window, with his eyebrow furrowed, and lowering his head while homesickness wells up in his heart. The translation of these two lines is profound and intriguing in meaning, so the artistic conception is highly consistent with that of the original poem.

In addition to “beauty in sense”, Xu also emphasizes “beauty in sound” and “beauty in form” in his translation. His translation of the poem adopts the “abab” rhyme scheme, which is commonly deployed in the English metrical verses. In the second and fourth lines, the words “aground” and “drowned” are similar to the Chinese “Shuang” and “Xiang” in vowels, so the principle of “beauty in sound” is achieved. Additionally, the whole translation is concise. In the third and fourth lines, the two expressions “looking up” and “bowing” are opposite to each other in meaning but similar in form, which is in line with the principle of “beauty in form”. In conclusion, Xu’s translation retains the style of the original poem with a deep artistic conception and a sense of rhythm for reading, the lexical choice is concise, and the structure of the translation is neat, reflecting the organic and simultaneous unity of beauty in three aspects.

2. The translation by Fletcher (1922, p. 25):

“The Moon Shines Everywhere”

Seeing the moon before my couch so bright,

I thought hoar frost had fallen from the night.

On her clear face I gaze with lifted eyes:

Then hide them full of Youth’s sweet memories.

In terms of the “three beauties” principle, Fletcher’s translation of the poem successfully achieves “beauty in sound and form”, but lacks “beauty in sense”. Firstly, in Fletcher’s translation, the rhymes of the poem are “aabb”, such as “bright, night” and “eyes, memories”, which ensures the readability of the translation with a sense of rhythm, and thus possesses “beauty in sound”. Secondly, Fletcher’s translation is formally equivalent to the original poem, consisting of four lines and a similar number of syllables in each line, and the whole translation reads concise, neat, and aesthetically pleasing, so his translation also achieves “beauty in form”.

However, Fletcher’s translation does not resoundingly achieve “beauty in sense”, and the reason for this is ascribable to his incorrect comprehension of the symbolism of the moon. Shi (2018, p. 40) explained that in Chinese literature, the moon mostly symbolizes reunion and the longing for unity, homeland, cosmic eternity, women and female beauty, natural beauty as well as loneliness and disillusionment. Among Li Bai’s 1,044 existing poems, there are more than 320 “moon poems” in which the “moon” is symbolized to express the feelings of “homesickness” and “nostalgia” (Li, 2014, p. 106). In Xu’s translation, he well grasps the symbolism of the moon as a symbol of longing as well as loneliness and disillusionment. However, in most Western literature, the moon is often given a totally different meaning, and it usually symbolizes the state of madness or lunacy, such as the legend of the werewolf, and the moon may also symbolize the miserable love (such as in *Romeo and Juliet*) and great ideals as well. Fletcher fails to convey the symbolism of the moon in this poem correctly, which deviates the translation from the original sense and artistic conception of the original poem.

In the first line of the translation, “Seeing the moon before my couch so bright”, Fletcher translates “bed” as “couch”, which is a miscomprehension. Although the second line “I thought hoar frost had fallen from the night” is equivalent to the original poem in terms of meaning, the word “thought” is too straightforward, which lacks the space for imagination. In the third and fourth lines, Fletcher utilizes personification and compares the moon to a beauty. Moreover, these two lines can be literally translated as “I raised my eyes and gazed at her beautiful face”, and in connection with the last line, which refers to the “sweet memories of my youth”, it seems that the feeling of homesickness here has turned into longing for the innocent love of the childhood. Therefore, the translator has changed the original poem’s sense of loneliness and homesickness to a great extent, and naturally cannot bring us the corresponding artistic conception and emotional feelings. According to the “three beauties” principle, Fletcher’s translation has achieved “beauty in sound” and “beauty in form”, but is insufficient in terms of “beauty in sense”.

Conclusion

The “three beauties” principle is of great significance in translating ancient poetry. Xu’s translation achieves the excellent unity of “beauty in sense, sound and form”, which offers reference for poetry translation. Although Fletcher’s translation achieves “beauty in sound and form”, “beauty in sense” is in absence. The translation of culturally-loaded ancient poetry is affected by the translator’s translation competence, personal subjective initiative, and socio-cultural background. To enhance the international influence of traditional Chinese ancient poetry by generating high-quality translations, translators are required to comprehend the meanings of the original correctly, and utilize appropriate translation principles and strategies, and more comparative studies based on translation theories should be conducted.

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