

A Comparative Study on Chinese Translations of Allan Poe's Poem *The Raven* From the Perspective of Three Beauties Theory

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Edgar Allan Poe, a renowned American Romantic writer and poet, is particularly famous for his uniquely eerie gothic novels. His poetry also possesses an aesthetic significance. However, research on his poetry within China primarily focuses on the literary aspects, with little attention given to translation studies. This paper, therefore, views Poe's poetry from the perspective of Xu Yuanchong's Three Beauties Theory and compares two Chinese versions of Poe's famous poem *The Raven* translated by Huang Long and Cao Minglun respectively at the levels of beauty in sense, sound, and form. It is found that both versions were translated in vernacular Chinese but embodied the stylistic characteristics of their respective eras. Huang Long's version presents classical flavor through domestication, whereas Cao Minglun's translation utilizes more terms with Western characteristics to reproduce the flavor of the original work. Overall, both translations successfully reproduce the aesthetic of the poem in sense, sound, and form.

Keywords: *The Raven*, Three Beauties Theory, poetry translation, Edgar Allan Poe

Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe was a famous American writer, poet, and literary critic in the 19th century. Despite being hailed as the founder of detective novels and a master of horror stories, Poe started his literary career with poetry, and ultimately ended with it (Poe, 2018).

For a long time, the focus of introducing Poe's work in China was mainly on his novels. It was only in 2012 that a comprehensive collection of his poetry, titled *The Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*, was published by Hunan Literature and Art Publishing House. Domestic researches on Poe's poetry primarily focus on themes, aesthetic qualities, artistic styles and techniques, as well as comparative and textual analysis, with relatively limited attention given to translation studies (Tang & Huang, 2010). The current sporadic studies on the translation of Poe's poetry pay little attention to aesthetics. Through enumerating and analyzing four translation versions of *The Raven*, Man and Su (2021) demonstrated different habitus, cultural demands, and ideologies in different versions, which implies discourse and cultural capital competitions between the cultural forces. Zhao (2021) conducted a comparative analysis of the classical-style and free-form translations of *The Raven*, examining the subtleties and transparency of mistranslations. From the perspective of semantic field theory, Huang (2011) analyzed the difference in the semantic relationship between several Poe's original poems and translated poems.

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Poe's aesthetic thought was initially influenced by Samuel Taylor Coleridge's aesthetic opinion before having a style of his own (Weng, 1986). He not only directly influenced Symbolist poetry but can also be regarded as the originator of various modernism schools in the 20th century (Zhu, 2007). Poe (1846) believed that beauty is the only canon of poetry, suggesting that Poe's poetry has great aesthetic value. However, there is still a large gap in the exploration of Poe's poetry translation from an aesthetic perspective. Therefore, this paper attempts to take two translations of Poe's famous poem *The Raven* as examples to explore the reproduction and loss of beauty in sense, sound, and form, with a view to provide reference for Poe's poetry study from the perspective of translation aesthetics.

Three Beauties Theory and Poetry

For a long time, domestic theorists have had different views on "beauty" in translation. Yan Fu's "Faithfulness, Expressiveness, and Elegance", Fu Lei's "Spiritual Resemblance", and Qian Zhongshu's "Sublimation Theory" are all manifestations of their translation aesthetics.

Lu Xun proposed the concept of "Three Beauties" in his *Outline of Chinese Literature History*, which are "the beauty of sense to please the heart", "the beauty of sound to please the ear", and "the beauty of form to please the eyes" (Xu, 2006, p. 5). Mao Zedong mentioned in his theory of writing new poetry that "new poems should be 'concise, generally neat, and rhymed'" (Xu, 2006, p. 25). On the basis of predecessors, the renowned translator Xu Yuanchong put forward the famous "Three Beauties Theory", which is of great significance to the translation of poetry.

Poetry is an art form that pursues aesthetics. Elements, such as rhyme, rhythm, and form constitute the unique language style of poetry, which resonates with readers and gives them aesthetic enjoyment through techniques, such as artistic conception, image description, and expression of emotions.

According to Xu Yuanchong, literary translations, particularly poetry translations, ought to adhere to "three beauties" principle of "beauty in sense, sound, and form", with the purpose of aesthetic pursuit (Xu, 2003). "Beauty in sense" suggests that the translated poem should convey the aesthetic conception of the original as much as possible, such as symbolic, deep, and implied meanings. "Beauty in sound" implies that the translated poem should have a sense of rhythm and musicality, including rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, end rhyme, etc., making it sound catchy when read. "Beauty in form" means that the translated poem should adhere to certain forms, such as poem length, number of lines, repetition, and parallelism, to give the reader a visual sense of beauty. Among the three beauties, "beauty in sense" is the most important, followed by "beauty in sound", and finally "beauty in form". In the actual translation process, the harmony of the three beauties is the highest state. If it is not possible to achieve all three simultaneously, it is acceptable to compromise on the "beauty in form", but the translation should strive to convey the "beauty in sense" and "beauty in sound" of the original (Xu, 2003).

Analysis of Three Beauties in Two Translations of *The Raven*

Poe created over 60 poems and an unfinished play in his lifetime. *The Raven* is his representative work and the one that brought him fame. It tells the story of the protagonist who was devastated after losing his beloved Lenore. One winter night, a raven came to visit. As he tries to get some information about Lenore from the raven, the raven keeps repeating "nevermore", exacerbating his sorrow rather than soothing it. This poem fully reflects Poe's poetic theories and literary concept (Poe, 2018), and it has profound aesthetic value.

This paper selects and compares the translated versions by Huang Long and Cao Minglun. Huang's translation was published in the sixth volume of the magazine *Truth, Beauty and Goodness* in 1929. This magazine advocates European and American aesthetic literature, with a focus on the depiction of the inner decadent emotions of human beings. Poe was an aesthete who believed that the mood of pathos best brought out the beauty of poetry (1846). Therefore, the magazine's translation of Poe's work is related to their similar aesthetic taste. With the purpose of introducing foreign literature to provide reference for the direction of new literature development, Huang Long translated the poem in vernacular Chinese (Wang, 2013). Scholar Zhou Linying supposes the translator Huang Long is the person who is a famous Chinese translator, translation theorist and expert in Shakespearean studies (Zhou, 2011). However, this translation version of *The Raven*, published in 1929, contradicts with the year of birth and death of the famous translator Huang Long, who was born in 1925 and died in 2008. Therefore, it can be concluded that the translator of this poem is not the same person as the famous translator Huang Long.

Cao Minglun is a renowned translator in contemporary China. He has translated a large number of Poe's novels and poems. His translation of *The Raven*, published in the third issue of magazine *Master* in 2009 (Cao, 2009), is the most mainstream and widely accepted version today. Cao also translated the poem as free verse in the vernacular.

Reproduction of Beauty in Sense

Among the Three Beauties, the "beauty in sense" is the most important. In Chinese culture, "sense" or "Yi" has a wide range of meanings, including concepts, contexts, and image, etc. "Beauty in sense" requires the translator to fully grasp the connotation of the poem, and accurately convey the sentimental and ideological meaning. By reproducing sense of the original poem, the readers are allowed to enjoy aesthetic pleasure. The following will compare and analyze the reproduction of "beauty in sense" in the two versions from specific words and phrases.

Example 1:

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary, (Poe Line 1)

Cao's translation: 从前一个阴郁的子夜, 我独自沉思, 慵懒疲竭,

Huang's translation: 昔我在午夜的阴森, 神衰, 疲倦, 为耽心,

Example 2:

Ah, distinctly I remember it was in the bleak December, (Poe Line 7)

Cao's translation: 哦, 我清楚地记得那是在风凄雨冷的十二月;

Huang's translation: 呀, 我犹能清晰地回想, 那是在腊月的荒凉,

Analysis: Image is the key element and core of the aesthetic value of poetry. The beauty derived from image is considered the highest beauty in poetry. Examples 1 and 2 are respectively the beginning of the first and second stanzas of the poem. Poe creates a desolate atmosphere through the natural and temporal images of "midnight dreary" and "bleak December", implying the melancholic emotional tone of the entire poem. In Example 1, "dreary" means "dull and depressing". Cao translates it as "阴郁", while Huang as "阴森". "阴郁" emphasizes the melancholy mood, and Cao's translation highlights the inner feelings of the protagonist. "阴森" emphasizes the horrible environment, and Huang's translation focuses more on the atmosphere. We think although the two translations have different focuses, each has its merits. In Example 2, "bleak" means "cold, dull, and unpleasant". Cao translates it as "风凄雨冷", while Huang as "荒凉". Cao's translation uses specific word "风" and "雨" to

depict the sad atmosphere, giving the readers a specific sense of the scene. The words “凄” and “冷” give a tactile sensation, making it feel as if the readers are on the scene, which is an excellent translation. By comparison, Huang's translation “荒凉” seems slightly abstract, and the beauty in the sense is slightly inferior. In addition, the translation of “腊月” (the twelfth lunar month) in the Huang's version adheres to the language characteristics of his era and has a more classical flavor, as does the translation of “Once upon a time” as “昔我”, which reminds readers of “昔我往矣” in *The Book of Songs*.

Example 3:

Back into the chamber turning, all my soul within me burning, (Poe Line 31)

Cao's translation: 我转身回到房中, 我的整个心烧灼般疼痛,

Huang's translation: 回到我书房的里面, 我灵魂内在地焚燃,

Analysis: Example 3 describes the protagonist hearing a sound outside the door, thinking it is the return of his lover's soul, opening the door but seeing no one, thus returning to the room, feeling disappointed. Regarding “all my soul within me burning”, Huang's version is a direct translation, while Cao's version slightly modifies the literal meaning of the original text. Considering the context, “soul” and “burning” deeply signify that the protagonist's slight hope was shattered. Cao's version “整个心烧灼般疼痛” better describes the protagonist's sense of sorrow at this moment, while Huang's version “灵魂内在地焚燃” is not expressive enough.

Example 4:

Whether Tempter sent, or whether tempest tossed thee here ashore, (Poe Line 86)

Cao's translation: 是不是撒旦派你, 或是暴风雨抛你, 来到此岸,

Huang's translation: 你或转徙于风涛的簸颠, 或见迷于鬼魅的引诱,

In Example 4, “Tempter” literally means “a person who tempts”, and Huang's translation adopts this interpretation and translates it as “鬼魅的引诱”. However, in this poem, “Temper” is actually a cultural symbol, referring to “Satan”, a name for the devil in Christianity. Cao's translation reproduces the cultural meaning of the word and translates it as “撒旦”. Comparatively, Cao's version more accurately grasps and restores the cultural connotations of the poem, allowing readers to better experience the cultural differences between the East and the West.

Example 5:

But, with mien of lord or lady, perched above my chamber door— (Poe Line 40)

Cao's translation: 而以绅士淑女的风度, 栖在我房门的上面,

Huang's translation: 有相公小姐般的举止, 棲在我书房门首,

Example 6:

Leave no black plume as a token of that lie thy soul hath spoken! (Poe Line 99)

Cao's translation: 别留下你黑色的羽毛作为你灵魂撒过谎的象征!

Huang's translation: 勿留下你的黑翎, 为你诳语的表征!

Analysis: In Example 5, Poe uses “with mien of lord or lady” to describe the posture of the raven perched in front of the door. Cao translates it into “绅士淑女”, while Huang translates it into “相公小姐”. In Example 6, “lie thy soul hath spoken” is translated by Cao as “灵魂撒过谎”, and by Huang as “诳语”. Although both translations are in vernacular Chinese, they both inadvertently show the characteristics of the era in which the translator lives. The word choice in Huang's version has a classical flavor, with a strong sense of domestication; Cao's version uses more words that display Western cultural characteristics for translation.

Reproduction of Beauty in Sound

Poetry is the art of language that is rich in rhyme and rhythm. The beauty in sound of poetry is usually manifested in alliteration, internal rhyme, and end rhyme etc. Poe believed that poetry is the creation of the beauty of rhythm (1984). *The Raven* uses a large number of alliterations, internal rhyme, and end rhyme, which are catchy to read and have a strong artistic appeal. This paper uses internal rhyme and end rhyme as examples to analyze the reproduction of the beauty of sound in two versions.

Example 7:

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore—
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,
As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door—
“‘Tis some visitor,” I muttered, “tapping at my chamber door—
Only this, and nothing more.” (Poe Lines 1-6)

Cao's translation:

从前一个阴郁的子夜，我独自沉思，慵懶疲竭，
沉思许多古怪而离奇、早已被人遗忘的书卷——
当我开始打盹，几乎入睡，突然传来一阵轻播，
仿佛有人在轻轻叩击，轻轻叩击我的我房间的门环。
“有客来也，”我轻声嘟囔，“正在叩击我的门环——
唯此而已，别无他般。”

Huang's translation:

昔我在午夜的阴森，神衰，疲倦，为耽心
于光怪陆离的古籍的穷究，——
当我垂头打瞌，半寐半醒，突然来了拍拍一声，
像有人轻轻地叩，叩我书房的门首。
“有位客人，”我含糊说，“叩我书房的门首——
不过这个，别的没有。”

Analysis: This is the first stanza of the poem. The words “dreary” and “weary” in the first line form an internal rhyme, which is reproduced in the Cao's translation with “夜” and “竭”, which is not reflected in the Huang's translation. Similarly, the words “napping” and “tapping” in the third line form an internal rhyme, which is reproduced in the Cao's translation with “睡” and “播”, which is also not reflected in the Huang's translation. However, someone thinks that “播” means “to hammer something violently”, which is inappropriate for describing the sound of the raven pecking the door (1846). In the fourth stanza, the internal rhyme of “rapping” uses the rhetoric of anadiplosis, and both the Cao's and Huang's translations reproduce it in the same way.

The Raven consists of 18 stanzas, each comprising six lines with an “abcbbb” rhyme scheme. Both translations reproduce the number of verses, translating it into 18 verses. In Cao's translation, all 18 stanzas preserve the “abcbbb” rhyme scheme, while in Huang's translation, 15 stanzas maintain this rhyme scheme. Poe believes that the long vowel /ɔ:/ has an infectious quality and is the best representative of the melancholic tone of the entire poem (1846). In each stanza, the second, fourth, fifth, and sixth lines rhymed with /ɔ:/. Cao's version reproduces with “an” rhyme, and Huang's version ends with “ou” rhyme. Although the rhymes in the two

translations are slightly weaker than the mournful feeling of the original poem's /ɔ:/ sound, both try to retain and reproduce the end rhyme of the poem.

Reproduction of Beauty in Form

The form of poetry distinguishes it from other literary forms. Although form is not the first priority, it does not mean that its importance can be ignored. Appropriate forms can help effectively express content, explore the beauty of inherent meanings, and give readers a sense of pleasure in reading. This paper analyzes the reproduction of the beauty of form in the two translations from specific lines and the translation of the entire poem's refrains.

Example 8:

What this grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt, and ominous bird of yore, (Poe Line 71)

Cao's translation: 这只狰狞丑陋可怕不吉不祥的古鸟何出此言,

Huang's translation: 这只严, 丑, 凶, 粗的古鸟, 究主什么凶咎,

Analysis: In Example 8, a series of adjectives describing the crow, such as "grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt, and ominous", are translated by Cao as "狰狞丑陋可怕不吉不祥", while Huang translates the first four characters as "严, 丑, 凶, 粗", with the meaning of "ominous" moved to the following sentence as "究主什么凶咎". In terms of form, Cao's version is closer to the original text and the combination of a series of adjectives reflects the protagonist's anger. Huang's translation, on the other hand, consists of four single characters, which is slightly paused when reading. Although it strives for conciseness in expression, it is slightly lacking in emotion expression. In addition, the word "凶咎", meaning "disaster", is taken from Wang Chong's "论衡·调时" from the Han Dynasty, which says "以一刃之金, 一炭之火, 厌除凶咎, 却岁月之殃, 如何也" (1974, p. 71). It can be seen that due to Huang's era, although his version is translated in vernacular, it is inevitably influenced by classical Chinese.

Example 9:

Only this, and nothing more. (Poe Line 6)

Cao's translation: 唯此而已, 别无他般。

Huang's translation: 不过这个, 别的没有。

Nameless here for evermore. (Poe Line 12)

Cao's translation: 在此已抹去芳名, 直至永远。

Huang's translation: 她的名字, 从此没有。

Quoth the raven, "Nevermore." (Poe Line 90)

Cao's translation: 乌鸦说 "永不复焉"。

Huang's translation: 鸦说, "永不再有。"

Analysis: When creating *The Raven*, Poe chose refrains as the pivotal structural element throughout the poem, aiming at creating new effects through the refrain changes. Due to the variable nature of the meaning of refrains, which is directly proportional to the brevity of the sentence, Poe decided that the optimal refrains should be a single word (1846). Consequently, the first, third, fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh stanzas conclude with "nothing more", the second stanza concludes with "evermore", and the remaining stanzas conclude with "nevermore", thereby conveying the protagonist's inexpressible sorrow. Cao translates these as "别无他般", "直至永远", and "永不复焉" respectively, and Huang translates these as "别的没有", "从此没有", and "永不再有". In terms of form, both translations preserve the original's of refrains and adhere to a four-character structure, which makes the translated poem neat in form and strong in rhythm, reproducing the beauty of form and rhyme simultaneously, thus conveying the connotations of the original poem.

Conclusion

From the perspective of Three Beauties Theory, this paper analyzes the reproduction of beauty in sense, sound, and form in the two translated versions of Poe's famous poem *The Raven* by Cao Minglun and Huang Long. In terms of the beauty in sense, Huang's version prefers literal translation, while Cao's version is more flexible and can better convey the cultural connotations by slightly changing the literal meaning of the original. For beauty in sound, Cao's version takes into account both end rhyme and internal rhyme, while Huang's version emphasizes end rhyme and lacks attention to the internal rhyme in the original poem. In terms of the beauty in form, Cao's version is closer to the original, and the beauty of refrains is well reproduced in both versions. Although the two versions are translated into vernacular Chinese, both show the different characteristics of the translators' eras. Huang's version presents classical flavor through domestication, whereas Cao's translation utilizes more terms with Western characteristics to reproduce the flavor of the original poem. Overall, both translations successfully reproduce the aesthetic of the poem. This paper takes *The Raven* as an example to explore the reproduction of Poe's poetry in translation from the perspective of Three Beauties Theory, aiming to contribute insights to future studies on the translation of Poe's poems.

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