

A Comparative Study on Two English Translations of Song of A Pipa Player from the Perspective of Translation Aesthetics

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Abstract

Poetry translation is a formidable task for the difficulty of achieving unity of form and content. This thesis analyzes two English versions of Bai Juyi's *Song of a Pipa Player* from the perspective of translation aesthetics of Liu Miqing, one is Xu Yuanchong's and the other is Witter Bynner's. It is found that translation aesthetics theory is a thread running through two translations, and reasons of different translation choices can be explained from translators' translation idea, thinking pattern and sensitivity of expressed emotion of the ST, which can be a guidance for poetry translation.

Keywords

Poetry Translation; *The Song of a Pipa Player*; Translation Aesthetics; Reasons.

1. Introduction

Song of a Pipa Player (hereinafter called *the Song*) is a long narrative poem written by Bai Juyi, a poet in the Tang Dynasty (A.D.618-907). Through the description of the pipa player's fine skills and her unfortunate experience, Bai Juyi expresses his sympathy for her and his distress of being banished. Its language is fluent, symmetrical and expressive, which makes its translation rather difficult. This poem has several English versions, among which that of Xu Yuanchong is the most famous. For its English translation, most studies focused on Xu's translation from the perspective of his "Three Beauty and Three Transformations theories". And comparative studies of *the Song* pay little attention to reasons why strategies and understanding of it vary from translators. This paper tries to analyze its two English versions of Xu Yuanchong and American Sinologist Witter Bynner from the perspective of translation aesthetics of Liu Miqing and reasons behind them, with translations from *Poems of the Tang and Song Dynasties*[1] and *Chinese and English Translations of Poems*[2] respectively.

Translation aesthetics theory is part and parcel of Chinese translation theory. In the early 1980s, Zhu Guangqian put forward the concept of "translation aesthetics", which built the road to the development of translation aesthetics[3].

Based on previous endeavors, Liu Miqing[4] further developed translation aesthetics and wrote *Introduction to Translation Aesthetics*, which constructs a systematic theoretical framework for translation aesthetics. In that monograph, Liu probes into the aesthetic object (source language text) and the aesthetic subject (translator), the means of aesthetic representation in translation, factors that influence the choice of translators and the standards of aesthetic beauty in translation. He divides the aesthetic object of translation into two levels: formal system and non-formal system, providing a comprehensive structure for the analysis of ST and TT.

2. Analysis of Two Translation Versions

2.1. Formal System

Liu Miqing holds the view that form is the ground of exploring the content(2005: 92). It includes pronunciation, words, sentences and paragraphs. This thesis analyzes the translation of the Song from the sound and word aspects.

2.1.1. Goodness in Sound

Bian Zhilin et al. [5]hold the view that outstanding elements of poetic form is rhythm and meter, the use of which is an important and difficult subject for poetry translation. *The Song* not only takes music as its theme, but also features a rhythmic beauty. It belongs to “the song line body”, one of the styles of Chinese ancient poetry, which was established in the early Tang Dynasty on the basis of Yuefu poetry of Han and Wei dynasties. Its syllables and meter are generally more free, with the form of the five or seven-character[6]. According to Zhao Changping[7], it is a representative of the poetic style of “Changqing Style”, which is a narrative and rhythmical seven-character song. Therefore, *the Song* retains the feature of narration and the rhythm of songs.

“Rhythm is produced by the periodic alternation of strong and weak notes. “The rhythm of poems of the Tang Dynasty is shown by the change of level and oblique tones” [8]. In this poem, Bai Juyi employs a large number of reduplicated words in the description of the player’s music, bringing the poem with the beauty of rhythm. For instance:

ST: 大弦嘈嘈如急雨，小弦切切如私语。

TT of Xu: The thick strings loudly thrummed, like the pattering rain; The fine strings softly tinkled in a murmuring strain.

TT of Bynner: The large strings hummed like rain, The small strings whispered like a secret.

In the ST, replicated words “嘈嘈” and “切切” have two same syllables respectively with the same tones, which means the same level and oblique tones. The repetition not only makes the pitch of the music played by the pipa girl leaps off the page, which shows her expertise, but also greatly enhances her sadness for the ups and downs of her life. Both versions embody the beauty of the original rhyme to a certain extent without retaining the repetition words. In Xu’s version, adverbs and verbs in “loudly thrummed” and “softly tinkled” are cooperated to make up for the inability to reproduce the rhyme of the ST. And adverbs “softly” and “loudly” stress the heaviness of the sound of thick strings and the gentleness of the sound of thin strings. In addition, He also uses end rhyme “/em/”, restoring the sound of the ST. Bynner’s version, however, does not strictly follow the rhyme of the ST. Around the First World War, the traditional metrical poetry was challenged due to its disadvantages such as the sacrifice of meaning for the form. So many Western poets began to use other writing forms, which inevitably affected poetry translation[9]. Although Bynner is not the innovator of free verse, he used this style in his translation, showing his keen judgment and foresight[10]. Therefore, his omission of the rhymes of the ST complies with the mainstream at that time.

2.1.2. Goodness in Diction

Liu Miqing claims that aesthetic of diction is related to the choice of words, register and collocation. Standard of aesthetic words are appropriateness, beauty, and compactness [4].

This poem is fluent, concise and vivid. People of all ages and sexes can understand and appreciate it[11]. So a qualified translation must reproduce Bai Juyi’s writing style. *The Song* contains numerous rhetoric devices like analogy to reflect the pipa sound according to its change of notes and volume. For example, the pipa sound is presented by specific images such as beads falling in a jade plate, songs of birds beneath flowers and blocked water under ice. Here is an example showing its diction:

ST: 浔阳江头夜送客，枫叶荻花秋瑟瑟。

TT of Xu: One night by riverside I bade a friend goodbye; In maple leaves and rushes autumn seemed to sigh.

TT of Bynner: I was bidding a guest farewell, at night on the Hsun-yang River, Where maple-leaves and full-grown rushes rustled in the autumn.

At the beginning of this poem, the main characters, places, events and scenery are outlined with only a few strokes, rendering a desolate atmosphere and setting the tone of this poem as solemn and mournful. The last sentence depicts a bleak autumn where maple leaves and rushes tremble against the wind, echoing with the preceding one the sadness of parting with a friend. According to Chinese Dictionary, “瑟瑟” refers to shiver, tremble, sound of wind or other soft sound such as the rustling of an autumn wind, which is exactly the same meaning with Bynner’s translation. Xu, however, does not use its denotation. He treats autumn as human beings by using personification to show its sadness. It can be said that Xu as the aesthetic subject grasps the emotion of the aesthetic object and has a deep understanding and empathy of it. Xu’s choice of words could also be explained by the principle of “three transformations” proposed by him: equalization, deepening and generalization [12]. Equalization means that when the surface and deep meaning of the ST and TT are consistent, and it can be used to directly convey the meaning of the ST. The “sigh” here could be regarded as an equalization because English does not have the corresponding onomatopoeia. It conveys the deep meaning of “瑟瑟”, endowing autumn with human emotion. Even though this poem has seen over 1000 years, its translators endeavored to maintain its aesthetic quality. Xu also retains the end rhyme.

2.2. Non-formal System

Non-formal system consists of fuzzy elements such as emotion and image, which is an indefinite and non-quantitative system. The aesthetic information of non-formal system is shown by the aesthetic object’s meaning and image, emotion and mind[4].

2.2.1. “Feeling” and “Mind”

It is crucial to grasp the author’s emotion and mind, on which choice of words and writing style can be based. An example is illustrated:

ST: 同是天涯沦落人，相逢何必曾相识！

TT of Xu: Hearing her story, I sighed again and again. “Both of us in misfortune go from shore to shore.

TT of Bynner: “We are both unhappy — to the sky’s end. We meet. We understand. What does acquaintance matter?”

After the pipa girl tells her experience of being neglected by her husband and her bygone prime days, Bai Juyi, who is being disparaged, has a strong resonance. This line expresses his empathy and frustration of being unappreciated, achieving an integration of narration and expression of his emotion.

Bynner’s version adopts literal translation, which correctly delivers the meaning. Its emotion is not as deep as that of the ST. For example, the translation of “沦落人” is rendered as “unhappy”, which emphasizes a temporary bad mood, thus weakening the pipa girl’s and the Bai’s pain and helplessness caused by unfairness and uncertainties of life. In Xu’s translation, “sighed again and again” and “misfortune” appropriately capture the gloom and sad feelings of the ST. Although the form of the ST disappears, the author’s feelings are fully transplanted. This confirms that the aesthetic subject is subjected to the cultural difference between languages and his aesthetic perception. In addition, as emotional stimulation is an indirect experience for the translator, it is difficult to reproduce the emotion of the ST[4]. Xu Yuanchong is a Chinese

native speaker and is an expertise in Chinese poem, so he has an advantage in understanding and reproducing the expressed emotion.

2.2.2. Image and Symbol

Image is an implication of poets' thoughts and feelings. Symbol is simply a method of expressing emotions by borrowing objects, that is, expressing emotions with the help of objects. Liu Miqing[4] claims that such fuzzy aesthetic information belong to a high-level aesthetic activity in translation. So they increase the difficulty of reproducing implied emotions of the author, thus the TT differs among translators with different aesthetics. The image of moon can be seen frequently in ancient Chinese poetry. It appears five times in this poem. The following example is the first one when the author and his friend are about to part:

ST: 醉不成欢惨将别，别时茫茫江浸月。

TT of Xu: Without flute songs we drank our cups with heavy heart; The moonbeams blent with water when we were to part.

TT of Bynner: For all we had drunk we felt no joy and were parting from each other, When the river widened mysteriously toward the full moon—

The second sentence describes a misty night scene, the atmosphere of which is in line with the sorrow of separation shown by the first one. The moon here is a conceptual metaphor. According to Lakoff and Johnson[13], "human thought processes are largely metaphorical" and metaphor is a way of thinking. Each conceptual metaphor is involved with a source domain, a target domain, and a source-to-target mapping[14]. Target domains tend to be abstract to help the understanding of source domains. The moon as a metaphor is an embodiment of thinking pattern. For Chinese readers, the source domain "the moon" is mapped to the target domain of people's down feelings of separation, homesickness and loneliness so on. It is an unique conceptual metaphor in Chinese. For western readers, "the moon" can be mapped to happiness[15]. Therefore, different thinking pattern is an impediment for translators.

In Xu's translation, "moonbeams blent with water" represents the integration of boundless river and the moonlight, showing a static picture. Bynner, on the other hand, depicts the river as a moving scene expanding toward the moon, in which an integration of them displayed by the moonlight's reflection on the water disappears. So Xu's translation better reproduce the misty beauty and sadness. For the translation of verb "惨", it is appropriately translated as a prepositional phrase "with heavy heart", while Bynner translates it as "felt no joy", which is not correspondent with sadness because it includes a feeling of indifference.

3. Conclusion

Through a comparative study of two translations of Song of a Pipa Player from a the perspective of translation aesthetics, it is found that both translators reproduce the meaning of the ST on the whole, but Witter Bynner's is not as precise as that of Xu Yuanchong in conveying emotion, and Xu completely retained the goodness of sound of the ST. This can be explained from their translation idea, thinking pattern and sensitivity of expressed emotion of the ST, which can be references for poem translation. In addition, the discussion on translations of Song of a Pipa Player enables Chinese readers to have a deeper understanding of Chinese culture. Although the work of Xu Yuanchong is better than Sinologists Bynner's in terms of aesthetics, which one is more acceptable to the target language readers and reasons are unknown. And the inspiration for Chinese poetry translation is worthy of further study.

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