ISSN: 2688-8653

A Corpus-Based Comparative Analysis of Three Translations of "When You Are Old": A Study of the Translational Approaches of Yuan Kejia, Bing Xin, and Yu Guangzhong

Yu Li

Nanjing University of Information science and Technology, Nanjing, China

Abstract

Yeats's poem "When You're Old" is deeply loved by readers around the world for its strong emotional, concise but rhythmic language. The poem has many Chinese translations, among which the translations of Yuan Kejia, Bingxin and Yu Guangzhong are the most representative. On the basis of the corpus method, this article systematically compares these three translations from the four aspects of language style, image reproduction, rhythm and cultural connotation through the method of "original text first, translation comparison later", explores their respective translation strategies and the aesthetic tendencies reflected behind them, and analyzes their communication in combination with the characteristics of the text. The gains and losses of poetry, in order to provide theoretical reference for the practice of literary translation.

Keywords

Poetry translation; corpus-based comparative analysis; translation strategies.

1. Introduction

William Butler Yeats is a towering figure in Irish poetry, and “When You Are Old”is one of his representative works. The poem unfolds from a lyrical second-person perspective, reflecting on the sincerity and fleeting nature of love. In the process of Chinese translation, translators need to handle the rhythm, rhetoric, emotion, and cultural differences of poetry. Yuan Kejia, Bing Xin, and Yu Guangzhong are all outstanding poets and translators, and their markedly different translation styles provide valuable samples for translation studies. Research on translator style based on parallel corpora focuses on how different translators handle the same linguistic phenomena in the source text. (Zhang Guangfa & Wang Shuman, 2025)[1]. This paper intends to adopt a corpus-based comparative approach to conduct a line-by-line analysis, exploring in depth their translation strategies and their preservation and reconstruction of the poetic essence of the original poem.

2. Comparative Analysis of the Original Text and Translations

Original text, first stanza:

When you are old and grey and full of sleep,
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,
And slowly read, and dream of the soft look
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;

Yuan Kejia’s translation:

当你老了，头白了，睡意沉沉，
在炉火旁打盹，请取下这本书，
慢慢读着，回想你过去眼神的柔和，

ISSN: 2688-8653

回想它们昔日浓重的阴影；

Analysis:

Yuan Kejia mainly adopts the translation strategy of interpretation. The first sentence “头白了，睡意沉沉”translates “grey and full of sleep”. The English word “grey”originally means “greyish white”, but Yuan Kejia did not directly translate it as “当你灰白了”, but adopted free translation , which is translated as “头白了”, this interpretation is in line with Chinese expression habits; "nod by the fire" is translated as “在炉火旁打盹”, and the word “dazing” is vivid, which brings the image of old women closer to the eyes of readers; “dream of the soft look""is translated as “回想你过去眼神的柔和”, “dream”originally means "to dream" or "a dream". The translator uses the word “recall” here, rendered as“柔和” which is more emotionally gentle, so that the poet's tone reveals more soft emotions. The concluding sentence "浓重的阴影" retains the image of “shadows deep”, and the poetry extends the sense of nostalgia and passing. The translator also takes into account the rhythm of the poem. For example, “慢慢” in “慢慢读着” is smooth and natural, which naturally reflects the slow action of the elderly reading poetry。

Bing Xin’s translation:

你老了，头发白了，睡意沉沉，
在炉边打盹，请取下这本诗，
慢慢地读着，回想你过去的眼光，
那柔美的神情，那深邃的影子；

Analysis:

Bing Xin's translation is distinguished by a feminine perspective and a gentle, graceful style. Her use of “this poem” (rather than “this book”) reflects her understanding of the original as a poetic literary work. The phrase “你过去的眼光”carries a pun-like double meaning: ：“眼光” (literally “glance”or “eyes”) not only refers to visual perception but also hints at the affection and understanding that once existed between the speaker and the beloved.“soft look”offers a more concrete and pictorial rendering of “柔软的目光”, while “柔美的神情”preserves the depth and mystery of the imagery in “shadows deep”."深邃的影子," in turn, preserves the depth and mystery of the imagery in “shadows deep”. Compared with Yuan's version, Bing Xin's translation exhibits a slightly more feminine aesthetic sensibility, placing greater emphasis on lyrical expression and emotional transmission.

Yu Guangzhong’s translation:

当你老了，头发灰白，昏昏欲睡，
在炉火边打盹，请取下这本诗集，
慢慢诵读，回想你昔日的眼神，
那柔和的光采与它深邃的影子；

Analysis:

In Yu Guangzhong's translation, “book” is not translated as “书”but replaced by “诗集”, which more accurately defines the text attributes. The word “recitation” differs from the “读”used by Yuan Kejia and Bing Xin, emphasizing the rhythm of poetry and the ritual sense of recitation; “柔和的光采” is more poetic than “soft look”and creates a stronger visual effect; the last line “与

ISSN: 2688-8653

它深邃的影子”retains and expands the original image, constructing the tension between time and memory. Yu Guangzhong's translation pays more attention to poetic quality and rhetoric. His diction is more elegant, and there is less everyday intimacy.

Original text, second stanza:
How many loved your moments of glad grace,
And loved your beauty with love false or true,
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,
And loved the sorrows of your changing face;
Yuan Kejia’s translation:
有多少人爱你欢快迷人的时光，
爱你的美貌，以虚伪或真诚的情感，
唯独一人爱你朝圣者的灵魂，
爱你变化不定脸上的忧伤；

Analysis:
The biggest feature of Yuan Kejia's translation is the translation of “朝圣者的灵魂”. In this translation, he literally translates “pilgrim soul”, which is full of religious and philosophical meanings, which is in line with the mysticist tendency in Yeats's poetry; “moments of glad grac E”is translated as “欢快迷人的时光”, which extends the poetic image of the original poem; although “虚伪或真诚的情感”although "虚伪或真诚的情感" is not as rhymed as the original, it clearly conveys love that is true or false at the semantic level. Although the overall rhythm is not as neat as the original poem, it is smooth and natural.

Bing Xin’s translation:
有多少人爱你青春欢畅的时辰，
爱慕你的美丽，假意或真心，
唯独一人爱你朝圣者的心灵，
爱你衰老脸上哀戚的皱纹；

Analysis:
Bing Xin translated“sorrows of your changing face”into“哀戚的皱纹”and embodied the “变化的面庞”into “wrinkles”, with a stronger visual and emotional impact. She uses words that often appear in love, such as “爱慕” and “假意或真心”, to preserve the original poem's description of the difference between true and false love. In the rendering “朝圣者的心灵”, although “心灵”slightly deviates from the original meaning of "soul", it is integrated into the translator's religious complex.

Yu Guangzhong’s translation:
有多少人爱你青春欢乐的容貌，
爱你的美丽，或假意或真心，
只有一人爱你朝圣者的灵魂，
爱你衰老脸上哀愁的变化；

ISSN: 2688-8653

Analysis:
Yu Guangzhong's translation in “青春欢乐的容貌” understands “moments of glad grace”as the dynamic moment of beauty itself; although the “哀愁的变化” does not embody the “皱纹”of the translation of Bing Xin, it accurately conveys the meaning of the original English text; in addition, Yu Guangzhong reuses the "爱你" sentence style, the sentence style is neat, with excellent rhyme and rhythm. He also retained the original meaning of "pilgrim soul", translated as "朝圣者的灵魂", and maintained the philosophical side of Yeats's poetry.

Original text, third stanza:
And bending down beside the glowing bars,
Murmur, a little sadly, how Love fled
And paced upon the mountains overhead
And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.

Yuan Kejia’s translation:
你便在炉边低声诉说，略带伤感，
爱情是怎样逃去，
在头顶的群山中漫游，
并把脸藏进一群星星里；

Analysis:
Yuan Kejia's translation uses the strategy of amplification. First of all, the original meaning of “murmur”is “轻声”, and Yuan Kejia added “诉说”, which adds a sense of narrative to the poem; the expression “群山中漫游” has a sense of space, and the expression “藏进一群星星里”contains a romantic image of escape. In general, Yuan Kejia's translation is coherent in imagery and natural in rhythm, continuing the poetic style of the first section.

Bing Xin’s translation:
你低声地叹息，炉火闪耀，略感忧伤，
爱情是怎样逃避了你，
它在山巅上缓步徘徊，
把脸庞藏入繁星之间；

Analysis:
Bing Xin also used the the strategy of amplification, adding “叹息” before “murmur”, which more directly expressed the sad image conveyed by the original poem. “炉火闪耀”also used amplification, adding “闪耀”, and the poetic picture jumped on the paper; “缓步徘徊” is for “paced” .The interpretation highlights the hesitation and hesitation of love; “藏入繁星之间” is faithful to the original poem “amid a crowd of stars”, which retains the romance and mystery of the original. The overall expression of Bingxin's translation is soft and beautiful, with a slight tendency toward prose.

Yu Guangzhong’s translation:
你便在炉边低语，有些哀伤地说：

ISSN: 2688-8653

爱情如何逃遁，
它在群山之巅漫步，
将脸庞藏在繁星之间。

Analysis:

The word "逃遁" in Yu Guangzhong's translation uses literary expression. Compared with the other two translators, Yu Guangzhong uses literal translation for "murmur".. The word "巅" in "群山之巅" emphasizes the loftiness of love; the original "amid a crowd of stars" is translated as "藏在繁星之间", and the spatial image is stronger. The translation strategy of direct translation is mainly adopted in this translation. The translation reflects the classical and modern translation style of Yu Guangzhong the basis of retaining the original meaning.

3. Comparison of Translation Strategies and Theoretical Discussion

On the whole, although the three translators remain faithful to the original meaning, their translation strategies differ. Yuan Kejia places greater emphasis on philosophical thought and structural restoration, seeking a balance between rhythm and poetic expression, and employs imagery intensification to reinforce the abstract meaning of the original. Bing Xin emphasizes emotion and rhythm; her language is gentle and intimate, and she tends to adopt sequential translation and polishing strategies, incorporating feminine delicate sensibilities. Yu Guangzhong, by contrast, focuses on reconstructing poetic beauty and rhetorical rhythm, restoring the literary tension of Yeats's poetry through diction of high artistic density. Taking "murmur" in the third stanza as an example, in the original poem words such as "murmur" and "amid" cause the emotional climax of the second stanza to gradually subside, and the tone turns calm and subdued (Gao Tingting, 2021)[3]. This tonal shift is respectively reflected in the three translations as Yuan Kejia's "低声诉说," Bing Xin's "低声地叹息," and Yu Guangzhong's "低语," reflecting the translators' different handling of the original poem's emotional rhythm. At the cultural level, "translators should flexibly employ translation strategies and, on the premise of meeting the needs of target readers, preserve the linguistic and cultural features of the source text as much as possible, so as to enhance the acceptability of the translation" (Ding Lifu & Tang Jing, 2025)[2]. Their renderings of the core image "pilgrim soul" best embody their respective styles: Yuan Kejia retains a literal translation to emphasize its religious nature; Bing Xin renders it as "心灵," weakening its religious symbolism; and Yu Guangzhong combines poetic quality with an expression of faith.

4. Conclusion

"When You Are Old" is a lyric poem marked by deep emotion and rich imagery. The three translators each reconstructed it to varying degrees from the perspectives of structure, emotion, and rhythm. A corpus-based comparative analysis reveals that excellent poetry translation is not merely a reproduction of language, but also a reshaping of aesthetic beauty and the spiritual world. Translation is not only "re-creation," but also an embodiment of the spiritual resonance between the translator and the original work. In the future, more Chinese translations can be incorporated to conduct quantitative corpus analysis and reader reception surveys, thereby enriching the levels and dimensions of research on poetry translation.

References

[1] Zhang, G. F., & Wang, S. M. (2025). A corpus-based comparative study of the translation styles of Du Fu's poems into English. Foreign Language Education Research, 13(2), 36–42.

ISSN: 2688-8653

[2] Ding, L. F., & Tang, J. (2025). A corpus-based comparative study of translators' styles in the translation of Huainanzi · Yuandao Xun. Journal of Anhui University of Science and Technology (Social Science Edition), 27(2), 76–84.

[3] Gao, T. T. (2021). A comparison of Chinese and Western love poetry: Taking Yeats's "When you are old" and Xu Zhimo's "Chance" as examples. Masterpieces Review, (17), 139–140.