

On the English Translation of Tang Poetry in the Perspective of “Harmony-Guided Three-level Poetry Translation Criteria”—A Case Study of “Song of the Roosting Crows”

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Abstract— *The translation of ancient Chinese poetry has always been an insurmountable mountain in literary translation, and Li Bai's poetic merits as a unique symbol of ancient Chinese poetry are more favored by Chinese and foreign translators. Some of the translations are to an extent mixed with drawbacks. Based on Dr. Wang Feng's "Harmony-guided Three-Level poetry translation criteria", this paper compares and analyzes four English versions of Li Bai's "Song of the Roosting Crows". It demonstrates the practical value of this theory in Chinese poetry translation, hoping to promote the dissemination of Chinese literature and culture.*

Keywords— *Tang poetry translation, Harmony-guided Three-Level poetry translation criteria, "Song of the Roosting Crows", Li Bai.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Tang poetry is one of the most precious cultural heritages of Chinese nation like resplendent pearls in the history of Chinese poetry. It has been at the forefront of introducing Chinese culture to the world. In the Tang Dynasty as a whole, the poets numbered thousands, among which Li Bai “the Poet Immortal” is no doubt one of the most outstanding ones. From the “lotus just budding” period of 18th century, to the preheating period of the 19th century and the thriving 20th century, both the quantity and quality of the English translations of Li Bai's poetry have apparently increased. Scholars' research scope has expanded from poem translation only to the study of his life, historical and social background. Moreover, the

original translation principle of making literal translation prior to indirect translation has also changed in that regulated verse translation and prose poetry translation co-exist. It therefore requires a new angle to evaluate these poetry translation and the “Harmony-guided Three-Level poetry translation criteria” has given us an opportunity to regain the beauty of Tang poetry as well as the insights of poetry translation.

II. HARMONY-GUIDED THREE-LEVEL POETRY TRANSLATION CRITERIA

Differences exist in all aspects of cultural communication or language transformation. It's no doubt that this complicated process of information transfer may come

across some difficulties, which were also referred as “six disharmonies” (Wang Feng, 2015). Based on predecessors’ outstanding translation theories, Dr. Wang Feng made an innovation in balancing the disharmonies in poetry translation. At the macro level, it emphasizes the “Harmony” theory. At the middle level, resemblance in style, sense and poetic realm is put in the first place. At the micro-level, the “Eight Beauties Criteria” is used to guide the practice of poetry translation.

2.1 The Macro Level: Harmony

The concept of “Harmony” inherits the beauty of moderation in classical Chinese aesthetics. Originated from The Book of Rites, “Harmony” or “Balanced Harmony” is regarded as the common principle of neither exceeding nor falling short of the line. Its highlight of the balanced state has helped poetry translation demystify the dilemma of theory, such as whether to adopt the method of foreignization or domestication and how to choose between form similarity and spirit similarity. The great differences between English and Chinese make it possible to obtain both of them in most cases. Therefore, the theory of Harmony, which emphasizes the beauty of internal balance, rises in response to this condition at the macro-level.

2.2 The Middle Level: Similarity of Styles, Senses, Artistic Conceptions

2.2.1 Similarity of styles

The “similarity of styles” means that the translation of poems should keep the original styles as much as possible. Styles reflect the author’s unique artistic expression and the temperament, which have close connection with the characters of the time as well. Although it has been emphasized that the translated text should be faithful to the original, the translator will consciously or unconsciously publicize his own translation style (Hu & Xie, 2017). To reach the similarity of styles, the translator’s personality needs to be considered as well. The style of Tang poetry varies from powerfulness to melancholy, subtle suggestion to broad-mindedness. In order to keep its unique styles and cultural characteristics in the target language, a variety of translation methods or strategies should be used. Translators needs to realize whether the poem to be

translated is close to his/her translation style or not and try to reproduce the original style.

2.2.2 Similarity of senses

The “similarity of sense” refers to the poetic meaning of translated poem coincides with that of the original one. It’s acknowledged that meaning must be translated in translation. However, under the high-context culture, Chinese poetry stresses the expression of emotion in a subtly suggestive manner. While under the low-context culture, English poems tend to adopt a straightforward and factual manner of expression. It is dangerous to try to impose the value system of the source language on the translated culture (Bassnett, 2004). Generally, an explicit translation strategy is used to translate the poetry of high-context culture (as in China) into low-context culture; information reduction usually appears in translating the poetry of low-context culture (as in Britain and America) into high-context culture.

2.2.3 Similarity of artistic conceptions

The “similarity of artistic conceptions” holds that the comprehensive effect of artistic conception produced by the translated poems in the readers’ mind is similar to that produced by the original poems. Emotion and scenery are mutually generated, and the scene and emotion internalize to construct artistic conceptions (Yang, 2010). Aesthetic conception or *Yijing* refers to a state where the scene described in a literary or artistic work reflects the intended sense and sensibility. This concept developed into an important criterion to judge the quality of a literary or artistic work, representing an accomplishment drawing on classical writings through ages. It has also become a hallmark for all outstanding literary and artistic works. But the artistic conceptions can hardly be reproduced in translation practice. The inability to reproduce does not exclude “approximation” which the excellent translation is usually based on (Guo, 1999).

2.3 The Micro level: Eight Beauties

The eight-beauty standards cover the beauty of form, music, image, emotion, implication, refining words, allusions and gestalt. It’s based on Xu Yuancong’s theory of “Three Beauties”, Gu Zhengkun’s poetry appreciation theory, Lin

Yutang’s theory of “Five Beauties” as well as Peter Newmark’s translation aesthetic views, which have provided comprehensive criteria for poetry translation practice and criticism from the micro level. It is noteworthy that a good translation doesn’t necessarily contain all the eight beauties.

III. THE INTRODUCTION OF “SONG OF THE ROOSTING CROWS”

“Song of the Roosting Crows” is one of the old titles of the *Yuefu* poems. According to *the Collection of Yuefu Poems*, Emperor Jianwen, Emperor Yuan and Xiao Zixian of the Liang Dynasty had written under this title. The works of them are all about the erotic feeling between men and women after sunset, which is of little significance. Although Li Bai also wrote a long night's feast of the king of Wu with his beauty, which seemed to be an erotic poem as well, he broke through the stereotype of his predecessors and infused his classic magnificent style. Not only did the content change from singing and erotic love in the old topic to satirizing the court's obscene life, but also made a bold innovation in form. The original text is as follow:

姑苏台上乌栖时，吴王宫里醉西施。
吴歌楚舞欢未毕，青山欲衔半边日。
银箭金壶漏水多，起看秋月坠江波。
东方渐高奈乐何！

As a poem relived about history, it fully described how the King of Wu indulged himself in pleasure making and forgot all about the common folks. Before Li Bai went to the palace to take office, he made full use of his imagination and wrote this unique poem. Li Bai showed his cynical and critical attitude towards the wanton behavior of the King of Wu, which also contained the intention of hoping that the rulers could learn from it.

IV. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE ENGLISH VERSIONS OF “SONG OF THE ROOSTING CROWS” BASED ON THE “HARMONY-GUIDED THREE-LEVEL POETRY TRANSLATION CRITERIA”

Different translations have different purposes and emphases, which reflect varied aspects of the beauty of Tang poetry. In order to make better use of this standard, this section selects four versions of “Song of the Roosting Crows” for a comparative analysis. Its feasibility and effectiveness in poem appreciation and translation guiding principles can be verified through this process. And they were translated by Rewi Alley (1980), Stephen Owen (2004), Sun Dayu (2007) and Xu Yuanchong (2007).

4.1 Macro Level

Different from the traditional even antithesis of Tang poetry, Li Bai’s “Song of the Roosting Crows” ends with a single line. This one line finishes the poem suddenly in a cold inquiry, which makes it more eye-catching and evocative. But, the unique creation may be hard to keep in English versions since it’s not as “harmonious” in form as other Tang poetry. Besides, the contrast between English hypotaxis and Chinese parataxis further move the translators out of reach for harmony at the macro-level. Among these four translators, only Xu Yuanchong had retained the style in the rendition, such as its terseness and brevity, but it inevitably comes with impairment of meaning. The other three versions adopt the free-verse-translation to reproduce the original imagery at the expense of a symmetrical form. By and large, these translations have tried to preserve harmonious beauty of the original text in their own ways. The “Harmony” at the macro level, however, is challenging in the face of those differences between English and Chinese.

4.2 Middle Level

At the middle level, the similarity of styles, senses and artistic conceptions will be included. In terms of “similarity of style”, “Song of the Roosting Crows” doesn’t follow the free and unstrained style which is typical of Li Bai. Instead, it tends to be implicit and concise but with rich feelings and implications (Mu, 2009). Although Li Bai didn’t make

a specific description of the scenes, he wrote a series of changing images when day topples into night. The whole article is written in an objective way without any derogatory word. However, the sharp and cold satire deeply connects with the spirit. Four translated versions have faithfully kept the original's plain and implicit style and reproduced the original imagery, such as the roosting crow and the moon falling into the river.

On the "similarity of senses", the understanding of the original is the foundation of translation, and expressions are the outcome of comprehension. As a whole, these translators have grasped the basic meaning of "Song of the Roosting Crows". Nevertheless, there are several deviations in meaning that merit attention. For example, Xu Yuanchong paraphrased "姑苏台" as "Royal Terrace", while the other three transliterated it as "Gusu Terrace" or "the terrace of Kusu". According to *The Best Regulated Poems of the Tang and Song Dynasties*, poems on history are written when poets see historical sites that take their minds to the past. Founded by the King of Wu in the Spring and Autumn Period, Gusu Terrace witnessed the rise and fall of history. It's necessary to keep the original meaning since it's based on the true historical story. Without the aid of "Gusu" or "Kusu", the terrace would lose some of the historical authenticity value. Similarly, Rewi Alley specifically translated "吴王宫" into "Chunhsiao Palace" which is one of the palaces on Gusu Terrace, while the others adopt literal translation, as shown in Stephen Owen's "the Wu king's palace" and Xu Yuanchong's "Royal Palace". The original text doesn't point out in which palace the story was set, and it's burdened with detailed description to an extent.

As the soul of poetry, artistic conceptions can only be perfectly expressed on the basis of a thorough understanding. One of the greatest characters of poetry is that it expresses the poet's thoughts and feelings with the least words and the tersest structure. As far as the "similarity of artistic conceptions" is concerned, the original text ends with an exclamatory sentence "东方渐高奈乐何!" which breaks the even format of the ending sentence of former poems of the same title. This lonely sentence is not only like the sigh of the King of Wu who

hated the night being so short, but also like the poet's warning to the indulgent life of the King of Wu. Stephen Owen and Xu Yuanchong transformed the exclamatory sentence into an interrogative one, making the original artistic conception more visualized. In this cold question, the poem abruptly stopped and realized the "similarity of artistic conceptions". But, Rewi Alley connected the ending sentence to the preceding part instead of separating it as a single one. Besides, the declarative sentence lost the irony tone implied in the original poem. Thus, the artistic conception is deprived of to a certain degree. Although Sun Dayu kept the exclamatory ending in his translation, the implicit meaning was outshined by the strong plaint, let alone to achieve the "similarity of artistic conceptions".

4.3 Micro Level

Poetry translation has its particularity. The main function of poetry is the function of aesthetics and the catharsis of emotions. Poetry of different nationalities has different artistic characteristics in expression. And these factors will inevitably be highlighted in the process of translation. With the help of the "Eight Beauties Criteria", these four translated versions will be further analyzed at the micro level from the artistic view.

To begin with, the beauty of form, with a pleasant visual effect, is the first to arouse an aesthetic response. At the same time, it also has emotional impact that can enhance the power of emotional expression (Wang, 2015). The length, number and structure of lines determine whether poetry reach a higher degree of formal beauty. "Song of the Roosting Crows" doesn't follow the traditional form, which makes it out of the ordinary and create a unique artistic characteristic. Due to the differences between Chinese and English, the number of words will vary. Therefore, there must be some defects in restoring the formal beauty of the original poem. The metrical-verse-translation of Xu Yuanchong is no doubt better than the free style in the respect of beauty in form.

Second, the beauty of music is mainly embodied through the tone, rhythm and syllables and it should be reproduced in translation. Even if the original poem is in a metrical style, the musical beauty of the translated poem is not

indispensable and should not be placed in the highest position. Poetry in different cultures are born with their own nationality and integrated with their own poetry language. Once separated, they cannot be reproduced in another language (Zhou, 2014). After all, the conflict between English and Chinese cannot be dismissed completely. Hence, it is not necessary to rhyme in every poem for the sake of musical beauty. Generally, the four translated poems have followed the rules of end rhyme. Because the original one is not a standard metrical poem, there is nothing wrong to abandon the beauty of music in some verses.

Third, the beauty of image emphasizes the visual beauty formed by the perceptual and sensible images in reality or imagination. The translator should accurately grasp the essence and connotation of the image in the original poem, and let the readers of the target language understand and recognize the characteristics of the image in the poem, so as to appreciate the beauty of the image in the original poem (Wang, 2015). The first two verses sketch the outline of Gusu Terrace at sunset and the dim silhouette of the beauty Xi Shi in the palace. Under the background of the roosting crows, the gloomy atmosphere reappears in the translation.

Fourth, the beauty of emotion requires that the translation should be able to reflect the emotion of the original text. Poetry translation should not be limited to reproduce the language of the original poem as the ultimate goal, but to translate the emotion of the poem (Wei, 2013). From a specific perspective, this poem is not only a criticism and satire of the emperor's extravagant life, but also a lament that a good life and a good life can't be long. This kind of exclamation will appear only when the incomparable confidence, infinite passion and extremely open mind exist at the same time (Leng, 2019). Because of the use of interrogative sentence, Stephen Owen and Xu Yuanchong perfectly reproduced the critical and satirical emotion. The translation of Sun Dayu is more like a sigh with feeling, while the sarcasm lost. In the same way, Rewi Alley did less better than Stephen Owen in expressing the strong feelings

Fifth, the beauty of connotation lies in the implicit words.

Proper unexpressed content like the white space in ancient ink paintings compliments the other elements in the poem and gives the mind a way to pursue free imagination. The greatest character of "Song of the Roosting Crows" is the subtle suggestion. Li Bai set the Wu palace in the background of dim dusk, which made the "roosting crows" take on some symbolic color. A feeling of the dark atmosphere surrounding the Wu palace vaguely appeared. It's natural to associate the declining trend of the sun with the coming down of the Wu State. This kind of atmosphere is in sharp contrast to the scene of "drunken Xishi in the palace of the King of Wu", implying that a feeling of sadness follows that of sorrow. The meaning outside the image subtly runs through the whole poem. Sun Dayu gives too much unnecessary details on the description of images. Although it's more faithful, the beauty of connotation, one of the most obvious features of Tang poetry, is lost. The other three versions successfully embody the brevity and suggestiveness.

Sixth, the beauty of diction requires the translator to respect the hard work of the original author in his creation, and to strive for perfection in order to reflect the content to be expressed. "衔" is a great portrayal of the passing of time. The King of Wu was still in the middle of excitement, but suddenly found that the mountain in the West had engulfed half the round of red sun, and dusk was coming. In this respect, Xu Yuanchong did better than the rest three. The use of "beak-like mountain-peaks" and "peck" personalize the mountain, giving a strong sense of movement and a wealth of imagination. "坠" has the same function of "衔". Stephen Owen and Sun Dayu both used "sink low" as a substitute, while Xu Yuanchong translated it with "hang low" and Rewi Alley described it as "fell down" to the river. "Sink low" implies a sense of urgency since there is not much time left, while the expression of "hang low" lacks of the dynamic state. Rewi Alley's "fell down" personalized the moon but deviated from the original meaning.

Seventh, the beauty of allusion makes the poetry concise and implicit. Besides, the deep meaning in context will arouse rich association, thoughts and feelings that are not easy to tell directly can also be conveyed to the readers

(Wang, 2015). Built on the authentic history, “Song of the Roosting Crows” is filled with allusions. “姑苏台” symbolizes the wanton life of the King of Wu and contains rich cultural meaning. The toponym is not only a linguistic phenomenon, but also a cultural phenomenon. It coexists and changes with culture (Wei, 2019). Of course, there are many reasons for the collapse of the State of Wu from a victorious country, but the King of Wu is addicted to alcohol and debauched life, which is one of the important reasons. It’s necessary to be add annotations. But in the translation, few have explained about this history. Sun Dayu inserted a footnote, making it easier for English readers to appreciate the profound meaning of this poem.

Eighth, the beauty of gestalt refers to the reappearance the beauties of a poem as a whole. The beauty of gestalt includes the specific seven beauties mentioned above, as well as the beauty of numbers and the beauty of perspective transformation, etc. In fact, not every poem has a fixed beauty of gestalt (Wang, 2015). How to reproduce the beauty of gestalt should be determined by its position and weight in the whole poem.

In the light of the three-level poetry translation criteria and the analysis of the four translations of “Song of the Roosting Crows”, the authors tried to translate this poem as follows:

At sunset when crows fly back to Kusu Terrace,
Beauty Xishi is growing drunk in the Wu Palace.
Yet Wu songs and Chu dances are still kept on,
The gray hill is to swallow half of the sun.
From the water clock more water drips away.
To the river autumn moon makes its headway.
At dawn King Wu wonders where his joy shall stay!

Notes:

Kusu Terrace: Built by the King Helu of Wu in the Spring and Autumn Period, it is located in Mountain Gusu, Jiangsu Province.

Xishi: A concubine of the King Fuchai of Wu. She was used by the Fuchai’s enemy to overthrow the State of Wu.

V. CONCLUSION

Under the guidance of the “Harmony-Guided Three-level Poetry Translation Criteria”, this paper provides a new perspective for the appreciation and translation of Tang poetry through the analysis of four English translation of Li Bai’s “Song of the Roosting Crows”. At the macro and middle level, these four translation have tried to preserve harmonious beauty and similarity in styles, senses and artistic conceptions by and large. At the micro level, it can be concluded that the translation of Xu Yuanchong excelled in conveying the beauty of form and diction. The translations of Rewi Alley, Stephen Owen and Sun Dayu are faithful to the original poem, while losing the beauty of form. But the relatively free translations perfectly reproduce the beauty of allusion and connotation. On the whole, the “Harmony-Guided Three-level Poetry Translation Criteria” is of significance in guiding the translation and appreciation of Tang poetry, which will further promote the canonization of Tang poetry in the English world and facilitate the cultural exchanges between China and the Western world.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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