

# ***Research on Untranslatability of Tang Poetry from the Perspective of Theory of Three Beauties — Taking Xu Yuanchong's Translation of 300 Tang Poems as an Example***

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**Abstract:** On the platform of international cultural exchange, the traditional Chinese culture, with its rich content, shines brightly in the world. Tang poetry is an important part of traditional Chinese culture and is also loved by many foreign readers. Therefore, exploring effective translation strategies is one of the important tasks to promote the dissemination of Tang poetry. Untranslatability exists in the translation of Tang poetry, which is one of the key problems troubling translators. In the existing research, there is still a gap in how to solve the untranslatability of Tang poetry, and there is a lack of effective and systematic translation strategies. The theory of Three Beauties is an important translation theory put forward by Xu Yuanchong, a leading scholar in Chinese translation circles. The theory of Three beauties requires that the translation should conform to three standards: beauty of sound, beauty of form, and beauty of meaning. This paper chooses the case analysis method and analyzes some cases of *Xu Yuanchong's English Translation of 300 Tang Poems* based on the theory of three beauties to explore how to deal with the untranslatability of Tang poems in line with the standard of three beauties. This paper divides the case into two parts: language and culture. Author comes up with translation strategies to deal with these two types of untranslatability. This paper focuses on the compensatory strategies of Tang Poems found by the author when reading *Xu Yuanchong's English Translation of 300 Tang Poems*. This strategy is an innovation of the previous compensation methods, and it also shows the translator's overall understanding of the text for readers to read. According to the research findings, the author concludes that the most important thing for translators is to understand the connotation of Tang poetry and use translation strategies according to the specific situation.

**Keywords:** Theory of Three Beauties, Tang Poetry, untranslatability, *Xu Yuanchong's English Translation of 300 Tang Poems*

## **1. Introduction**

“Tang poetry is the essence of our literature treasury, the status in the world literature history is also very high,” said Xu [1]. In China's splendid cultural heritage, the rich literary heritage accumulated over three thousand years of history, and constitutes an important organic component. Chinese

classical literature truly reflects the unique national cultural psychology and aesthetic taste of Chinese people. Among them, Tang poetry, which represents the peak of Chinese classical poetry, shines brightly in the history of Chinese classical literature. Han and Yao share opinions about the culture of Tang poetry. "Tang poetry culture is the model form of Chinese traditional culture, which is not only the aesthetic value of Chinese literature but also the spiritual style and cultural representation of an era" [2]. And with a wide range of themes and characters, Tang poetry is favored by the world with its unique style in world literature. Therefore, the translation of Tang poetry and the dissemination of Tang poetry has become a pivotal project to spread Chinese culture.

However, there is a special problem in introducing Tang poetry to the outside world. That is, in the translation process how to faithfully convey the thoughts of the original poem and accurately reproduce the artistic conception of the original poem. This problem is also one of the key problems in the study of Tang poetry translation. The author thinks that if we want to achieve the best effect of delivering Tang poetry, we should pay more attention to the target language and target audience. Following their reading habits, the maximum extent is to retain the characteristics of Tang poetry format. Therefore, to reduce the reading difficulty of foreign readers in Tang poetry, increase their interest, and help foreigners better understand Chinese traditional culture, it is very necessary to find an effective translation method of Tang poetry. However, Tang poetry is untranslatable, which has long been a focus of debate translation. How to deal with the untranslatability of Tang poetry is the main content of this article. The author will analyze some cases of *Xu Yuanchong's translation of 300 Tang poems* based on his theory of "Three Beauty". The purpose of the analysis is to explore how to deal with the untranslatability of Tang poetry and summarize systematic translation methods based on classified cases. It is hoped to fill the gap in the research of systematic methods for dealing with untranslatability in Tang poetry translation.

Xu Yuanchong put forward the standard of "Three Beauty" in translated poetry, and advocated that translated poetry should transfer and preserve the charm of the original poem as far as possible from the three levels of meaning, sound, and form. Under the guidance of "Three Beauty", the author believes that poetry translation is an organic whole. The expression of poetic language should be considered in the selection of translation methods. Since the theory of Three beauties was put forward by Mr. Xu Yuanchong in 1978, there have been a large number of articles using the theory of three beauties to study Chinese classical poetry. The number of articles in Chinese and foreign languages reached 1248 when the database queried "on Three Beauties" by subject. The theory of three beauties is mainly used in translating various poems. Gu believed that Mr. Xu Yuanchong's standard of three beauties in Tang poetry promoted the discussion of Chinese poetry theory [3]. Wang analyzed the gains and losses of Mr. Xu Yuanchong's Theory of Three beauties in translated poems [4]. Yan holds that the theory of three beauties permeated in the translation of *Ci of Chu* by Mr. Xu Yuanchong reflects the spirit of pursuing truth and the tradition of seeking beauty, a literary translation theory with Chinese characteristics [5]. Based on the principle of three beauties, Ni compared and analyzed the differences and similarities between Eastern and Western translators' strategies for translating Tang poems into English [6]. Therefore, the theory of three beauties proposed by Mr. Xu Yuanchong has important guiding significance for studying how to translate the untranslatability of Tang poetry. This study will adopt the case analysis method and select some Tang poems in *Xu Yuanchong's English Translation of 300 Tang Poems* as cases. First, the author analyzes the untranslatability of cases by using the theory of three beauties and uses translation methods to deal with the untranslatability of the original text. Finally, the translation methods used in these examples are summarized and a conclusion is drawn. At the end of the article, some translation compensation strategies will be added, such as adding annotations. The research results of this article will be of reference value to the translation practice of Tang poetry and the dissemination of Chinese traditional culture. Translators will have more abundant and systematic

translation strategies to choose form, which can help to deal with the diverse untranslatability in Tang poetry. The traditional Chinese thoughts and culture contained in Tang poetry can also be spread through a high-quality translation to target readers.

## 2. Literature Review

Translator Xu regards translation as an art. The high-quality translation should conform to the three standards of beauty of meaning, sound, and form [7]. The meaning and the United States should convey the content of the original text in the field, without mistranslation, omission, or multiple translations. The phonetic beauty is that the pronunciation and reading of the translation have rhythm. It can borrow the meter commonly used by British and American poets, choose rhymes similar to the original sound, and express the phonetic beauty of the original text with the help of methods such as alliterative compounds, rhyming compounds, and repetition. The beauty of form is to achieve consistency and neatness in the number of lines, sentence length, and the antithesis of the translation.

Mouninput forward the statement that "translation is limited" and elaborated on the possible obstacles in translation [8]. According to Mounin "there are many obstacles in translation, which restrict the feasibility of translation" [8]. Mouninalso proposes that the meaning, syntactic structure, and communicative environment of language are barriers to interlingual translation, and reveals the extent to which these barriers are limited in translation [8]. Thus, untranslatability is the concrete manifestation of these translation obstacles. In particular, Wangproposed that in the translation of some works with strong emotional, artistic, and cultural characteristics, the accuracy of the translation can be achieved in different degrees due to the difference in languages [9]. Therefore, untranslatability is not absolute, but refers to the loss of language information, the change of language information, or semantic connotation in language translation and transformation, so that the target language and the source language information is not completely equivalent.

The untranslatability of traditional Chinese poetry can be divided into three kinds. In previous studies, the untranslatability of traditional Chinese poetry is reflected in form, expression, and content. In terms of form, traditional Chinese poetry has a fixed word limit, with each poem showing the same length of text. This creates a unique beauty of the shape. The same number of words and neat typesetting also give people a kind of solemn beauty. In terms of expression, Chinese traditional poetry contains a large number of corresponding imagery. For example, Xu had a translation about "城阙辅三秦,风烟望五津" [10]. In this poem, "城阙" and "风烟" correspond to each other as nouns. Both sentences contain numerals in the same position. The last aspect, which is also the main research aspect of this paper, is the untranslatability of the content of Chinese traditional poetry. The untranslatability of these contents is very important. If a suitable translation strategy is not found, the meaning of the poem may be affected.

## 3. Cases Study

### 3.1. Definition

According to *Xu Yuanchong's translation of 300 Tang poems*, the author believes that the untranslatability of Tang poetry is as follows: some characteristic forms of Tang poetry and the language expressions that foreign readers are not familiar with. For example rhyme ( the beauty in sound), antithesis ( the beauty in form), allusion( the beauty in sense), traditional customs ( the beauty in sense), number words ( the beauty in sense), and so on. According to the categories of untranslatability, the author will select specific cases to list the untranslatability and analyze what kind of translation skills and methods are used to achieve the "three beauty" standard proposed by

Mr. Xu Yuanchong. Finally, these translation techniques are summarized into universal translation methods, which will add a practical method for the translation of traditional poetry in the future.

## 3.2. Cases and Translation Analysis

### 3.2.1. The Perspective from the Language

#### 3.2.1.1. Rhyme

ST: 风急天高猿啸哀，渚清沙白鸟飞回。  
无边落木萧萧下，不尽长江滚滚来。

TT: The wind so swift, the sky so wide, apes wail and cry.  
Water so clear and beach so white, birds wheel and fly.  
The boundless forest sheds its leaves shower by shower,  
The endless river rolls its waves hour after hour.[10]

This example comes from the Tang Dynasty poet Du Fu's *On the Height*. The author chooses the first and second sentences of the poem for analysis. In the original text, the neat structure of the number of words and overlapping words constitute the unique phonological beauty of Tang poetry. To retain this aesthetic feeling, the use of adverbs and conjunctions in translation becomes the key. In the first couplet, "so" is used many times as a bridge linking images and adjectives, which makes the structure of the whole translation uniform. At the same time, linking two rhyming verbs with "and" creates a phonetic structure similar to the original. The technique of combining verbs and conjunctions in the translation forms the structure of four words, which is in harmony with the rhythm of the pauses of four words in the original text. In the second sentence, Xu Yuanchong pays more attention to the choice of words. The verb ends with "s" and the sentence ends with "er". The words in the translation make the two sentences harmonious in tone, consistent in meaning, and have a strong sense of sound effect, creating a musical beauty similar to the original poem.

#### 3.2.1.2. Antithesis

ST: 穿花峡蝶深深见，点水蜻蜓款款飞。

TT: Deeper and deeper amid flowers go butterflies,  
Slowly and slowly on water skim dragonflies.[10]

Antithesis refers to the words that correspond to the level and oblique of a word and the emptiness and substance of a word. Long proposed that antithesis is one of the highlights of Tang poetry [11]. It puts words with the same or opposite concepts in corresponding positions in the poem to make them set off each other and thus make the sentences more appealing. Antithesis includes the correspondence of rhyme and image. This example comes from The third sentence of Du Fu's *The Winding River(II)*. In this poem, not only does the image correspond with words of the same part of speech in the same position, but also the level and oblique words at the end of the sentence are opposite. To ensure the beauty in form, Xu paid attention to the location of the image in the translation. In the translation, "flowers" and "water", "butterflies" and "dragonflies" correspond in location. Although the order of nouns and descriptive words is reversed from that of the original text, it does not affect the translation to create a new form. Readers of the target language can also feel the charm of Tang poetry in form.

### 3.2.2. The Perspective from the Culture

#### 3.2.2.1. Allusion

ST: 庄生晓梦迷蝴蝶，望帝春心托杜鹃。

TT: Dim morning dream to be a butterfly,

Amorous heart poured out in cuckoo's cry. [10]

The poem was written by the Tang Dynasty poet Li Shangyin and contains several allusions. The translator hopes to try his best to preserve the cultural characteristics of the text, but due to the length of the text, the translator cannot explain clearly the origin of each allusion in the simplified Tang poem translation. Xu's translation chooses this method to retain the actual image in the allusions and remove the influence of the author's rhetorical devices on Tang poetry. To put it simply, the translator can first translate the superficial meaning of the poem and abandon some deep meaning. This is the best choice to ensure the integrity of the text.

In the source text, both sentences come from two stories. The first sentence is from Chuang tzu ——On Leveling All Thing, in which Chuang tzu dreamed that he was transformed into a butterfly and could not tell the difference between reality and dreams. Li Shangyin used it to describe life as a dream, where past events are not that important. The second sentence tells the story of a king of the ancient Shu State who died and turned into a cuckoo with a sad cry. Xu's translation removes imagery that can easily affect the intended audience, such as "庄生" and "望帝". And translate key images, such as "butterfly" and "cuckoo." This method makes the translation straightforward to understand and allows the reader to understand the emotion of the poem quickly.

#### 3.2.2.2. Chinese Traditional Festival

ST: 独在异乡为异客，每逢佳节倍思亲。——《九月九日忆山东兄弟》

TT: Alone, a lonely stranger in a foreign land,

I doubly pine for my kinsfolk on holiday.

——Thinking of My Brothers on Mountain-climbing Day[10]

Many ancient Chinese poets expressed their feelings and wrote very classic poems during festivals. They sometimes use festival nicknames, customs, and festival features to refer to the festival to express their feelings. Although China retains many festivals with ancient history and gives them foreign names, some meanings will be lost in the translation of Tang poems. Xu focused the translation of the poem on the title. Mountain-climbing Day names the time and place of the poem, also letting the reader know that it was a poem about a festival. Therefore, in the text of the translator can use "holiday" to translate "佳节", and does not have to explain too much so as not to affect the length of the whole translation. Xu also does not use the modern commonly translated names of festivals, such as Double Ninth Festival, Chong Yang Festival, or Chung Yeung Festival, in the translation, but does specific translations according to the meaning of the poem. This can help the target audience quickly grasp the meaning of Tang poetry and stimulate the reader's interest in reading.

#### 3.2.2.3. Fuzzy Number

ST: 瀚海阑干百丈冰，愁云惨淡万里凝。

TT: A thousand feet o'er cracked wilderness ice piles,

And gloomy clouds hang sad and drear for miles and miles.[10]

In daily life, numbers are thought of as measurement tools used to represent quantities. In some cases, a number can also be thought of as a word or symbol. This opinion can also be used in Tang poetry, and these numbers are usually fuzzy. "Numerals as the precise ones can be used to express the explicit degree quantity, time, distance or scope, and the function of the fuzzy ones performs implicit meanings", stated Mu [12]. Therefore, number appears as a word in Tang poetry and has a rhetorical function. The poem describes a desert snow scene. The function of fuzzy figures in the text is to exaggerate the grandeur of the snow scene. Xu's translation turns numbers into descriptive words. "百丈" is about 333 meters, and "万里" is about 4 million meters. Instead of these numbers, the translation uses a vague and exaggerated term. Therefore, the number of Tang poetry has its unique role, the translator should make a specific analysis and decide whether to translate into the exact number or the words to show its meaning.

### 3.3. Compensation Strategies for Untranslatability

Combining the analysis of the first two parts, the reasons for the untranslatability of Tang poetry can be divided into two parts, namely, the untranslatability of language and the untranslatability of culture. In addition to these translation strategies that can be used in the translation process, the authors also found some compensatory means that can be used after the translation process. Long proposed two compensation strategies: adding comments and multi-version translation [11]. They can help the target reader understand the meaning of omissions in the translation and refer to multiple versions of the translation. When reading *Xu Yuanchong's translation of 300 Tang poems*, the author found that some translations would add one or two sentences to explain the overall meaning of the poem. Their function is: when the translator has to abandon some deep meaning, these sentences can make up for it. For example, at the bottom of the translation of *The Sad Zither* (the case at the allusion section), there are words written behind the translation: The zither evokes vanished springs dim and free as the dream of a butterfly, amorous as the heart of a cuckoo, tearful as moonlit peat ls and vaporous as the smoke rising from sunburnt jade in the Blue Field [10]. This can be a more understandable and intimate way for the author to further explain the meaning of Tang poetry, or it can be a space to continue the deep meaning of Tang poetry. This is an interpretation outside the poetic form, which can more directly make up for the untranslatability of Tang poetry than the previous two methods. It also helps target readers to read and understand Tang poetry better.

## 4. Conclusions

Based on the analysis of some cases of *Xu Yuanchong's translation of 300 Tang poems*, the author found several systematic translation strategies which can be used in the translation practice of Tang poems. The research findings are divided into three aspects: First, from the perspective of language, translators can use conjunctions and adverbs to create phrases with consistent rhythm to ensure the sound beauty of Tang poetry. This ensures that the translated text has a phonetic structure that matches the original text. In the case of antithesis, the translator needs to adjust the image order and the choice of speech of each word according to the image position of the original text. Secondly, from the perspective of culture, to ensure the transmission of the meaning of Tang poetry and to retain the characteristics of Tang poetry to the greatest extent, translators need to deal with special writing methods and words according to specific conditions. When allusions appeared in Tang poetry, the translator should pay attention to the images with actual meaning and abandon some expressions of deep meaning in the translation to achieve the goal of form beauty. In the case of Chinese traditional festivals in the original text, it is not necessary to directly use modern commonly translated names but to make a decision based on the specific analysis of the surface description and



connotation of Tang poems. When dealing with fuzzy numbers, translators should determine whether to translate them into exact numbers or fuzzy number words according to the surface meaning expressed in Tang poems. To sum up, when dealing with the untranslatability of Tang poetry, translators should first pay attention to the meaning and deep meaning of Tang poetry, and then choose specific translation strategies according to specific situations. This article makes a certain supplement to the translation strategies for dealing with the untranslatability of Tang poetry. In the compensatory strategy of Tang poetry translation, the author puts forward a new compensatory method according to reading, that is, another way for translators to show the meaning of Tang poetry to target readers in a more understandable way. After analyzing these cases, the author finds that the "three beauties" coexist in Xu Yuanchong's translation, which not only has a neat rhyme in the form but also has the ideological conception of traditional Chinese culture. The theory of three beauties put forward by Mr. Xu Yuanchong has great guiding significance for the translation of Tang poetry. We should actively study and apply it to more translation work to better promote the spread of Chinese culture. At the same time, it is hoped that the author's research results can provide new ideas for the translation of Tang poetry in the future and increase the power of the transmission of traditional Chinese culture.

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