

Analysis of Translatability in Classical Chinese Poetry from the Perspective of Translation Strategies

Taking Xu Yuanchong's Translations of the Lyrics "Everlasting Longing" as Examples

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Abstract: Classical Chinese poetry is an important literary genre in Chinese literature, of which the Tang poems and Song lyrics are two of the highest artistic achievements in ancient Chinese poetry. The study of classical poetry translation has become a hot topic in Chinese literary translation. This paper aims to study the translatability of Chinese classical poetry from the perspective of the translation strategies of Xu Yuanchong by selecting lyrics titled "everlasting longing" in the Chinese-English Translation of 300 Chinese Tang and Song Lyrics authored by Xu Yuanchong, an outstanding translator. In the translation of Xu Yuanchong's poems, he emphasized the beauty of meaning, form and sound. Through a theoretical overview of important translation strategies and case study of the translation strategies adopted by Xu Yuanchong, the following conclusions are drawn: Xu Yuanchong's translation strategy of "creative translation" has greatly improved the translatability of classical Chinese poetry. Due to the particularity of the poetry style and literary form, the semantic meaning loss can be caused to a certain extent, so the translation strategy oriented by functional equivalence and aesthetic pursuit can provide the reference for the translation of Chinese classical poems and lyrics.

Keywords: Xu Yuanchong, classical Chinese poetry translation, translatability, translation strategies

1. Introduction

Classical Chinese poetry is an important literary genre in Chinese literature, of which the Tang poems and Song lyrics are two of the highest artistic achievements in ancient Chinese poetry. Ancient classical poetry usually expresses the spiritual world and social and cultural life of the author with strict metrical requirements and refined language art [1]. Therefore, the study of poetry translation also constitutes a hot spot in the study of Chinese literary translation. In this paper, poems with the title "Everlasting longing" in the *Chinese-English Translation of 300 Chinese Tang and Song Lyrics* [2], compiled by the distinguished translator Xu Yuanchong, are selected for

analysis, and the translatability of classical Chinese poems is explored in the light of Xu's translation strategies.

In order to realize the purpose of "going global" of Chinese classical poetry, research on the translatability between target language and the source language is of more prominent importance. In the future, it is expected that translators can make a good balance between foreignization and domestication when facing the translation situation under the scope of cultural turn, contributing to the export of national culture. The goal of Chinese culture "going global" and further conforming to the mainstream of the international society is on the basis of cultural exchange needs of target language readers and the application of corresponding translation methods.

2. Background of Xu Yuanchong's Classical Chinese Poetry Translation

Chinese poetry has a long history of fine descriptions of landscapes and ancient human life and of concise thoughts on objects. The English translation of the Book of Songs, published in 1871 by the English sinologist James Legge, was one of the first English translations of Chinese poetry. This was followed by Giles in England, Pound in the United States, and Yang Xianyi and Xu Yuanchong in China, who made great contributions to the development of English translations of Chinese poetry and promoted cultural exchanges between China and the West.

In terms of English translations of classical works in China, Xu Yuanchong's contribution is not to be underestimated, as his translations are numerous and of a wide range. Xu Yuanchong has a good command of several languages, including Chinese, French and English. According to statistics, nearly three thousand Chinese poems have been translated into English and French by Xu Yuanchong. These range from the Book of Songs to the poems and songs of almost every ancient dynasty and down to the modern poetry of great politicians, such as Mao Zedong, reflecting the influence of the specific context of the times on the translators. Xu Yuanchong, who has been translating for more than sixty years, summed up his translation career as "English and French translation in the 1950s, Dynasty Tang and Song works translation in the 1980s, leading the way in the 1990s, and reaching the peak in the 21st century" [3].

3. The Theoretical Basis of Translatability Analysis

This paper analyzes the translatability of Xu Yuanchong's classical poetry on the basis of the following widely academically recognized translation theories, that is, Functional Equivalence by Eugene A. Nida [4], 'Three Beauties' Theory by Xu Yuanchong himself. This paper holds that the translation theories reveal Xu Yuanchong's programmatic thoughts in translation essentially.

At the same time, this paper also finds the inevitability of semantic loss in translation practices of ancient poetry. It is because of the semantic loss that causes untranslatability, which is a point worth exploring and researching. The way to deal with untranslatability in translation is also an important practice for Xu Yuanchong to transform untranslatability into translatability.

3.1. Functional Equivalence by Eugene A. Nida

The central idea of Eugene A. Nida's theory is that of 'functional equivalence'. This is one of the most familiar views in Nida's translation theory. The so-called dynamic translation is a translation guided by the communicative theory of translation, that is, "from semantic to stylistic, reproducing the source language information in the receiving language with a natural equivalent close to the original". In brief, functional equivalence means that the translation and the original text should be linguistically equivalent in terms of function rather than in terms of form.

3.2. 'Three Beauties' Theory by Xu Yuanchong and His Pursuits of Aesthetics of Classical Poetry

In 1978, Xu Yuanchong's English-French translation of 42 Poems of Mao Zedong was published by the Luoyang Foreign Language Institute, and it was in the preface of this book that Xu Yuanchong first proposed that translations of poems should try to convey the beauty of meaning, sound and form of the original poems, which is where the 'three beauties' theory originated [5].

Different from merely translating the superficial meaning of poems, Xu Yuanchong fully embodies his aesthetic pursuit in the translation of ancient poems.

The "beauty of meaning" refers to the proper expression, which does not restrict his work to the direct description of the images of poems, but deeply displays the deep meaning behind the images, attaches importance to the translation of culture-loaded words, so that the translation can project culture. "Beauty of sound" focuses on the rhyme between the two lines of the poem at each interval. The "beauty of form" means that the words are of similar Numerical length by translation, and the length of expression is also basically suitable so that the reader can read them smoothly. Through rewriting and reconstruction, the sentence structure of the translated poetry is also neat and orderly in English expression, with balanced strokes and proper length. Xu Yuanchong also mentioned that the "beauty of meaning" is the most important, followed by the "beauty of sound" and then "the beauty of form". It is true that the foremost point in translation is to convey meaning and feelings, then the rhyme and forms.

3.3. Loss of Meaning (Untranslatability)

According to Newmark, the loss of meaning [6] in the target language is mainly manifested in four ways: firstly, if the content of the source text is related to the country's unique natural environment, social system and cultural practices, the meaning of the target language is bound to be lost; secondly, each language has its own phonology, grammar, lexical system and usage, so it is difficult to maintain correspondence between words and phrases in various languages in all aspects; thirdly, how to use the language is different for the translator and the author; fourthly, the translator and the author have different semantic theories and values. Lastly, the translator and the author have their own ways of using the language and different semantic theories and values [7].

4. Translation Strategies in Xu's Translations of Ancient Poems and Lyrics

Under the guidance of the above translation theories, Xu Yuanchong adopted the following strategies to realize the translatability of the translation of ancient classical poetry. Respectively are Creative translation as well as rewriting and reconstruction [8]. To put it clearly, Creative translation mainly includes a combination of domestication and foreignization as well as Literal translation and free translation. rewriting and reconstruction mainly include the transformation of sentence patterns and the adoption of narrative personality.

4.1. Creative Translation

In general, Xu Yuanchong, in his translation work *Chinese-English Translation of Three Hundred Chinese and Song Lyrics*, presents himself as using "The strategy of 'creative translation' consists of the following approaches: first, a combination of direct translation and paraphrase; second, a combination of naturalization and dissimilation; and third, the rewriting and reconstruction of the language of the verses and lyrics.

4.2. Combination of Domestication and Foreignization

The terms domestication and foreignization were first raised in the book “The Invisibility of the Translator” by Lawrence Venuti [9], a leading American translation theorist, in 1995. Domestication translation means localizing the original text with the target language or target reader in mind and adopting the expressions that the target language readers are used to express the original text’s content. Domestication translation requires the translator to serve the target language reader by following the way of speaking of the target reader. Domestication translation can help readers better understand the translation, and the readability of the translation is enhanced and more appreciated [10]. The translation of foreignization is to take the content and style of the source language as the priority and pay attention to retaining the national characteristics of the source language and language style features, requiring the translator to lean towards the author’s language. In foreignization translation, the source language expression should be adopted to convey the content of the source language, which means that the source language culture should be taken as the home, and the differences in national culture should be taken into consideration to retain the characteristics of the source language. As a result, a foreignization translation is of an exotic tone for foreign readers.

Generally speaking, domestication and foreignization translations are opposite and complement each other; they are often applied in the translation works together.

Foreignization translation tends to be used in Xu’s translation of the tune names of poems and lyrics. The meaning of the tune name “Changxiangsi” is translated into “Everlasting Longing”, closer to the source language. However, the tune name of Chinese classical poetry actually specifies the style and meter of poems and lyrics, which readers cannot realize when adopting the foreignizing translation strategy.

Foreignization translation tends to be used in Xu’s translation of culture-loaded words. For example, in Ouyang Xiu’s “Everlasting Longing”, “Zhu men” is translated as the Painted gate. In fact, “Zhu men” is a specific culture-loaded word in ancient Chinese. “Zhu men” refers to the gate of the palace of the ancient princes and nobles painted red to show their honor, and then generally refers to the rich and wealthy families. In some translated works, the word “Zhu men” is translated as a rich household. In Xu’s translation, “Zhu men” is directly translated as the painted gate, which is an alienated translation that preserves the cultural imagery of the source language.

On the other hand, domestication translation tends to be used in Xu’s translation of location terms. In Bai Juyi’s “everlasting longing”, Xu Yuanchong translated the name of “Bianshui”, “Sishui,” and “Wushan” into the Northern River, western river, southern hills. Instead of directly translating the names of the mountains and rivers into Chinese pinyin, he translated them according to their geographical location, which helps the reader to understand the general orientation concept of these geographical terms. The translation of geographical terms also helps readers to understand the history of the dynasty in light of the specific historical background. Such domestication translation is closer to the reader’s understanding.

4.3. Literal Translation and Free Translation

Literal translation and free translation are opposite and complement each other; they are often applied in the translation works together.

Literal translation refers to an adequate representation of the original. When the original coincides or almost tallies with the Chinese language in the sequence of vocabulary, grammatical structure and rhetorical device, literal translation must be used.

Free translation is also called liberal translation, which does not adhere strictly to the form or word order of the original.

In the translation of Bai Juyi's "everlasting longing", leaning on the building under the bright moonlight" is translated as "waiting from moonrise to moonset". The original sentence only describes the scene of someone waiting by leaning on the building under the bright moonlight. Since Chinese words can have rich associative meanings under the words, this beautiful expression can give people a sense of picture and imagination of artistic conception. However, when Xu Yuanchong translated this sentence, he used free translation techniques, emphasizing the verb image of "waiting", translating the meaning that the characters have been waiting from the moon to the moon, which is a kind of emotional expression.

In the translation of Ouyang Xiu's "everlasting longing", the literal translation of "a creek full of duckweed, girt with green willow trees" is adopted, and the scenery is faithfully and accurately described.

4.4. Rewriting and Reconstruction

Rewriting and reconstruction require a high level of translator's literary attainment and language mastery. Xu Yuanchong made good use of such strategies to realize the transformation of poetry translation from untranslatability to translatability. The transformation of sentence patterns and adoption of narrative Personality are frequently embodied.

The transformation of sentence patterns is used. In Bai Juyi's "everlasting longing", "long missing and long regretting" is translated as "O, how can I forget? How can I not regret? "The transformation of declarative words into interrogative sentences plays a role in strengthening the power of the language.

When it comes to the adoption of narrative personality, Xu Yuanchong often adds the protagonist's point of view, which is hidden in Chinese poems, to the English translation, which is also a practice of the translation strategy of rewriting and reconstruction. For example, in the translation of Lu You's everlasting longing, the translation of "my boat veers to the land, I make sail with the wind well", and the narrative persona, which is hidden in the original text, is reappropriated. Narrative personification is reintroduced because the subjectless expression in Chinese is in line with grammatical conventions, whereas the subject is valued in complete sentences in English.

5. Discussion

In Xu Yuanchong's translation of poems, he is guided by the "three beauties theory" proposed by himself, which represents his pursuits of aesthetics of classical poetry and emphasizes the "beauty of meaning, the beauty of form, and beauty of sound". The "beauty of meaning" is reflected in the fact that Xu Yuanchong. In the process of translating poems, he does not stick to the direct depiction of the imagery of the poems but translates the deeper meaning behind the imagery with his own in-depth understanding of it so as to interact with the readers with a strong sense of emotion. The "beauty of form" is reflected in the fact that Xu Yuanchong, through rewriting and reconstruction, makes the sentence structure of the translated poems equally neat and orderly in English, with balanced strokes and appropriate lengths. The "beauty of sound" is reflected in the fact that Xu Yuanchong paid great attention to rhyme in his translations of poems, which made them more readable.

6. Conclusions

Based on the analysis of poems titled "Everlasting Longing" in Xu Yuanchong's *Chinese-English Translation of 300 Tang and Song Lyrics*, this paper draws the following conclusions from Xu's

translation strategy to explore the translatability of classical Chinese poems and lyrics: Xu Yuanchong's translation strategy of "creative translation" has greatly improved the translatability of classical Chinese poems and lyrics. Due to the particularity of tune and style, the semantic loss of meaning will be caused to a certain extent, so the translation strategy oriented by functional equivalence and aesthetic pursuit can provide a good reference for translation. From the perspective of the types of tune names of poems and lyrics, this paper makes a detailed analysis of the lyrics titled "Everlasting Longing" and gives a detailed explanation of the "creative translation" proposed by Xu Yuanchong, which is helpful for readers to understand better the translation strategies advocated by Xu Yuanchong in translation. Due to the relatively short length and linguistic characteristics of the "Everlasting Longing", this paper still lacks in exploring the breadth of the translation of poems and lyrics under different tune names and the translation of poems and lyrics styles of different dynasties. In particular, the translation strategies of other metrical poems, longer lyrics and poems with different characteristics of different dynasties need to be enriched and perfected.

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