

On the Translation of “The Song of a Yue Boatman” Based on the Three-Level Criteria for Poetry Translation

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Abstract: “The Song of a Yue Boatman” is an important part of Chu culture. A good translation of it will be of great help to Chu culture’s “going global”. There are already several English versions, but whether they have reproduced the artistic conception of the original poem is still open to discussion. This paper will apply the Three-Level Criteria for poetry translation to analyze five translations of “The Song of a Yue Boatman”. Finally, the author will put forward a reference version accordingly.

Keywords: Three-Level Criteria; poetry translation; “The Song of a Yue Boatman”.

INTRODUCTION

As the forerunner of Chuci (楚辞, variously translated as *Verses of Chu* or *Songs of Chu*, which is an anthology of Chinese poetry traditionally attributed mainly to Qu Yuan and Song Yu from the Warring States period (453BC-221BC)), Yue Ren Ge(越人歌, The Song of a Yue Boatman) is of great importance in the history of China’s Chu literature and Chu culture.

The Chinese text reads as follows:

今夕何夕兮，擘舟中流。
今日何日兮，得与王子同舟。
蒙羞被好兮，不訾诟耻。
心几烦而不绝兮，得知王子。
山有木兮木有枝，心悦君兮君不知。

It is the translator’s responsibility to translate this poem faithfully and beautifully to disseminate Chu literature and Chu culture. Compared with other genres of translation, poetry translation is more difficult [1]. But it doesn’t mean poems are untranslatable. Susan Bassnett *et al.* [2] believe poems are translatable when the original poem is perfectly reproduced. As for the specific criteria, Xu Yuanchong [3] has put forward the theory of Three Beauties. Gu Zhengkun [4] has proposed the poetry appreciation theory. Lin Yutang [5] has come up with the principles of Five Beauties. Peter Newmark has raised his aesthetic viewpoints [6]. Wang Feng [7] has brought forward the Three-Level Criteria for poetry translation, which is the epitome and culmination of all these previous theories and principles.

Three-Level Criteria for Poetry Translation

The Three-Level Criteria include macro-level criterion, middle-level criterion, and micro-level criterion, which relatively correspond to Harmony, Resemblance in Style, Sense and Poetic Realm, and Eight Beauties.

The Macro-level: Harmony

Disharmonies are unavoidable in poetry translation because of the linguistic, cultural, and poetic differences between Chinese and English poetry [8]. Seeking a mean or harmony between two extremes may be a good way to deal with these disharmonies.

The Middle-level: Resemblance in Style, Sense and Poetic Realm

The middle-level criterion refers to “Resemblance in Style, Sense and Poetic Realm”.

Resemblance in Style

Style is the unique artistic expressions that the author has formed in long-term practice [10]. It is translatable and must be translated [9]. And the style of the original poetry should be maintained and reproduced in the translation. Though the translator may have his/her own writing style, he/she has to transplant the style of the original poetry.

Resemblance in Sense

Sense is an important standard to judge the artistry of a poem [11]. The sense of the translation

must be similar to that of the original poetry, or it may reduce the artistry. And since Chinese culture belongs to high-context culture while English-speaking country's culture is low-context, translators have to pay attention to the cultural differences between these two [10]. They should adopt various translation methods to achieve resemblance in sense.

Resemblance in Poetic Realm

According to the poetry translation criterion, resemblance in poetic realm means the comprehensive effect of artistic conception emerging in the target readers' mind is similar to that in the original readers' mind. And translators ought to achieve the criterion of resemblance in poetic realm. When the transplantation of form and diction are consistent with the transmission of poetic realm, it will be easier to convey it. But when they are not, translators should subordinate them to ensure the transmission of poetic realm [10].

The Micro-level: Eight Beauties

The micro-level criterion is the Eight-Beauties theory – beauty of form, musicality, image, emotion, suggestiveness, diction, allusion and gestalt.

Beauty of Form

Beauty of form is the external form of poetry itself. Whether a poem has higher beauty of form depends on the number of lines, arrangement, length, indentation and structure of it. But they are very hard to maintain in the translation because Chinese belongs to the Sino-Tibetan family while English the Indo-European family. What's more, translators also have to take into consideration the reproduction of other beauties. Hence, beauty of form should not be overemphasized [7].

Beauty of Musicality

Through the tone and rhythm of syllables in poetry, readers can feel the beauty of musicality, which is important to ancient Chinese poetry but sometimes it can be unnecessary. It does harm than good to pursue the beauty of musicality at the expense of grammar or meaning [7].

Beauty of Image

The "beauty of image" in the Three-Level Translation Criteria refers to the visual beauty formed by the perceptual elements of the vivid imagery or image group in reality or in imagination. And translators should fully understand the images in the original poem so that the target readers can appreciate it through their translation [10].

Beauty of Emotion

Beauty of emotion can be defined as the emotions of the poet through metaphors or his subjective expressions. And as is often the case, some common images are used to express emotional beauty. Beauty of emotion should be transmitted to readers. It

will help them to understand the poem as well as the poet better [7].

Beauty of Suggestiveness

Suggestiveness leaves readers imaginary space. The beauty of suggestiveness is one of the most remarkable aesthetic characteristics in Chinese poetry. The translator should be conscious of it and appropriately reproduce it [10].

Beauty of Diction

To achieve the beauty of diction, the translator has to meet two requirements. One is to respect the hard work of the poet and try to find the most accurate words to properly express the poet's ideas. The other is to polish their translation and constantly strive for perfection [7].

Beauty of Allusion

Allusions can enable readers learn more about traditional Chinese culture. It can also contribute to poetry's conciseness, implicitness and meaningfulness. But it isn't necessary for the translator to translate the allusions in the original poetry. Whether an allusion needs to be translated depends on its importance to the theme in the original poem [10].

Beauty of Gestalt

The beauty of gestalt refers to the reproduction of beauties in the poetry as a whole. But the above seven specific beauties cannot cover all beauties of different poetry, and not all the beauties are necessarily the translation criteria to evaluate one translation. Some beauties such as beauty of allusion may not exist in certain poems. Other beauties may be less important or unimportant. Each specific beauty should be given different degree of importance according to the characteristics of the original poem and the macro strategy of the translation [10].

Translation of "The Song of a Yue Boatman"

Five typical translations of "The Song of a Yue Boatman" will be presented and analyzed with the Three-Level Criteria for poetry translation.

Five English Versions of "The Song of a Yue Boatman"

All of the five English versions here are works of renowned translators. Comparison and analysis of them are not made to judge the translators' translating ability, but to constantly perfect the translation of "The Song of a Yue Boatman". The five versions are quite different in that even their titles are not the same. This makes them worthier of comparison and analysis. The five English versions are:

Version 1: Song of the Boatswain of Yüeh

What a fine evening is this, that I've come to this islet midstream!

What a fine day is this, that I share a boat with you, my prince!

Unworthy that I'd be so desired, when have I ever felt
such shame?
My heart's perplexed to no end, that I've come to know
you, my prince!
There are trees in the mountain, and branches on trees.
I yearn to please you, and you do not know!
TR. Irving Y. Lo [13]

Version 2: Song of the Yue People

What night is this
That I share the boat with the lord?
So attached am I to you
That I care not the humiliation.
Eagerly I yearn
To acquaint with my lord.
Trees grow on mountains and boughs grow on trees,
But why don't you know my mind?
TR. Wang Rongpei *et al.* [14]

Version 3: Song of the Southerners

Anonymous
What dream did we dream?
Oh, we boated in mid-stream.
What day is today?
Oh, on the same boat with the prince we stay.
Unworthy of his favor high,
Oh, we are so ashamed as to shut our eyes.
Our mind is troubled since,
Oh, to know our prince.
There're trees in mountains, oh! and trees will grow.
We're happy to see our prince, oh! But he does not
know.
Tr. Xu Yuanchong [3]

Version 4: The Yue Folk's Song

O what night is tonight,
all through the waves I row.
O what day is today,
I share with Your Highness the same canoe
O ashamed, ashamed am I, in status so low
O disturbed, disturbed am I,
Your Highness I come to know
O uphill grow trees, on the trees boughs grow
O my heart goes to you, but you don't know.
Tr. Zhao Yanchun [15]

Version 5: The Yue's Song

Anonymous
Oh, what a special night tonight,
Which witnesses this midstream float!
Oh, what a special date today,
When I'm grac'd to share with th' prince th' same boat!^①
Shy as I am, I'd boldly admit my love,
And what if people should snort and sneer?
Oh, affections well up in my heart,
Affections which are keen and sincere!
Oh, trees cling to th' mount, and branches embrace the
tree;^②
I love Your Highness, but Your Highness o'erlook me!
Notes:

① These lines, which consist of two exclamations, lively convey the Yue's great delight in the event, which brings her and the prince together.
② This line presents an analogic hint, foreshadowing the idea to be expressed in the next line. The tree and its branches symbolize the close interrelation of two young people in love.

Tr. Zhuo Zhenying [12]

Analysis of the Translations Based on the Three-Level Criteria for Poetry Translation

The above five versions will be compared and analyzed with the macro-level criterion, middle-level criterion, and micro-level criterion, namely Harmony, Resemblance in Style, Sense and Poetic Realm, and Eight Beauties. However, the beauty of suggestiveness and of allusion are unimportant in the original poem, here are actually six beauties to be discussed.

Analysis of the Translations Based on the Macro-level Criterion

In the process of translation, translators should be careful not to go to extremes when dealing with disharmonies. When translating "The Song of a Yue Boatman", translators should pay attention to the lyricism, change of the boatman's emotions, use of auxiliary words, and parataxis in the original poem. Take the use of auxiliary words for instance, "Xi (兮)" is an auxiliary word in ancient Chinese poems and can be translated into an exclamation "oh". In the five translations, the first two omit it while many "O" / "Oh" can be found in the other three. Too many exclamations here may do harm to the beauty of musicality and make the change of the boatman's emotions less clear. Omission of them may make readers unaware of "Xi" in the original poem. It seems that using one or two "O" / "Oh" is a better option here. However, it will increase the number of syllables. Actually, harmony can still be achieved in another way. Translators can make up for the omission with better diction to enable readers to feel the presence of "Xi" through the strong emotions expressed by words and sentence types.

Analysis of the Translations Based on the Middle-level Criterion

The translation has to be similar to the original poem in style, sense and poetic realm. In the original poem, plain words are used but the true feelings of the boatman are fully revealed. Translators have to maintain this style in their translation. Chinese culture belongs to high-context culture while English-speaking country's culture belongs to low-context culture [10]. The cultural differences between these two cultures may result in loss of information in the process of translation. However, the words in "The Song of a Yue Boatman" is easy to understand. In other words, its way of expression is similar to that in common English poetry. So, it is easy for translators to achieve the resemblance in sense here. Moreover, the original poem is not sung

by many boatmen but by one. Apart from the first version, all other versions have changed the personal emotional expressions into collective ones. Thus, the poetic realm of the original poetry has been altered in some of the versions.

Analysis of the Translations Based on the Micro-level Criterion

Whether a poem has higher beauty of form depends on the number of lines, arrangement, length, indentation and structure of it. There are five sentences in the original poem, while the last one has 14 Chinese characters. Usually, a Chinese poetic line is no more than seven Chinese characters; thus, the last line can be considered two poetic lines and can be translated into two English lines.

“The Song of a Yue Boatman” follows the rhyme scheme, “aabb”. The first two versions do not rhyme while the other three versions relatively follow the rhyme schemes, “aabb cddd ee”, “abcb bdbbb”, and “abcb efgf hh”. But in order to reproduce the beauty of musicality, it might be better if the translation follows the rhyme scheme of “aabb”, or “aabbcc”.

Words don't have meanings; people have meanings for words. Mountains, trees, and boughs actually have no feelings. But the boatman uses them to express his/her (it's hard to tell whether the poem is about a man or a girl) feelings. It is necessary to reproduce them in the translation.

Not only can the beauty of emotion be found through the above three images, but also in the emotional change of the boatman, from excitement to sadness. Translators have to reflect this change in their translation.

As for the beauty of diction, whether “今夕何夕兮” and “今日何日兮” in the original poem should be translated as exclamatory sentences or questions is worth discussing. These two sentences are used to express the boatman's ecstasy and excitement. Of course, exclamatory sentences can bring out the boatman's mood. But translating them as questions might also be better. Questions may make readers feel that the boatman is overjoyed and cannot remember anything else except being with the prince.

All in all, translators should try to reproduce all the artistic factors in the original poem and achieve the above five beauties as much as possible.

A Reference Version of “The Song of a Yue Boatman”

According to the discussion above, a reference version is offered here:

“The Song of a Yue Boatman”

Trans. by ZHANG Junchi, WANG Feng, TIAN Chuanmao

“What night is tonight?” in the merry boat I'm wondering.

“What date is today?” I'm overjoyed with the prince charming.

Humble and shallow, I'm overwhelmed by your fondness.

I find myself sorrowful, acquainted with Your Highness.

As trees grow from mountains and from trees twigs grow,

I fall into love with you but this secret you do not know.

SUMMARY

Based on the Three-Level Criteria for poetry translation, the authors have put forward a reference version. Poetry translation is difficult, but it will be easier if translators take a good translation criterion as their guideline. With the help of the Three-Level Criteria for poetry translation, hopefully, more and more poems can be properly translated, so that people around the world can better appreciate the beauties of them.

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