

A Comparative Analysis of the Three Versions of *A Psalm Of Life*

ANALYSE COMPARATIVE DES TRADUCTIONS DU *PSAUME DE LA VIE* DE LONGFELLOW

Bu Jing¹

Abstract: *A Psalm of Life*, the representative work of the famous American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, is taken as the first English poem translated into Chinese. It was in the year 1865 that Thomas Francis Wade first translated it into Chinese and after that various versions with distinctive features have been turning up.

This thesis endeavors to analyze three typical versions from three aspects, namely, the “form beauty”, the “sound beauty” and the “sense beauty”, according to the “three-beauty” principle of poem translation proposed by Professor Xu Yuanchong. The basic principles and methods of poem translation are concluded on the basis of the comparative analysis and the “Dynamic Equivalence” theory proposed by Eugene A. Nida.

Key Words: poem translation, spiritual resemblance, formal resemblance, “three-beauty” principle, dynamic equivalence

Résumé: *Le Psaume de la vie*, oeuvre réputée du poète américain Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, est considéré comme le premier poème anglais traduit en chinois. Depuis que Thomas Francis Wade l’a traduit la première fois en chinois en 1865, de nouvelles versions ne cessent d’apparaître dont chacune a son originalité. L’article présent, en vertu du principe de « trois beautés » dans la traduction du poème préconisé par le professeur Xu Yuanchong, entreprend une analyse comparative de ses trois versions les plus représentatives sur les plans de « beauté de forme », « beauté de son » et « beauté de signification ». A partir du résultat d’analyse, se référant à la théorie de l’« équivalence dynamique » du théoricien de traduction très connu Eugene A. Nida, l’auteur propose les principes fondamentaux de la traduction de la poésie.

Mots-Clés: traduction de la poésie, similitude d’esprit, similitude de forme

INTRODUCTION

Within the field of literary translation, it’s a well known fact that poem translation is the most challenging and laborious work, and thus principles and methods of poem translation have always been the most controversial in the theoretical study of literary translation. Poetry, as one of the most ancient literary forms in both languages, is the perfect unity of sound, form and sense in both languages. So the unity of beauty in the sound, form and sense has been regarded as the highest standard in poem translation. On the basis of this concept, professor Xu Yuanchong(1984) proposed the famous “three-beauty” principle in the poem translation ,that is, the “sound beauty”, the “form

beauty” and the “sense beauty”. He explained that poem translation should be as beautiful as the original poem in sense, sound and form. In that sense, a good poem translation should be a perfect combination of good pattern of rhyme and rhythm as well as the profound meaning implied in the original poem. Under the guidance of the principle of “three-beauty”, professor Xu Yuanchong has worked out many excellent English versions of Chinese poetry.

However, in the practical translation work, this kind of unity can not be satisfactorily achieved because no definition of a proper poem translation could avoid the basic difficulty—the tension between form and content. Then in the practical translation work, translators will inevitably lay particular stress on one side. But which one is more important in the poem translation? Different

¹ School of Foreign Languages, Central China Normal University, China.

*Received 13 January 2007 ; accepted 11 March 2007

scholars may make different choices, thus making it the most controversial part in the poem translation, that is, the dichotomy between sense and form. With regard to the argument for or against the form and content, there are two main schools in the poem translation—sense-oriented school (spiritual resemblance) and form-oriented school (formal resemblance).

Both schools have their reasonable claims on the principles of poem translation, however, which principle is better and more important, spiritual resemblance or formal resemblance? As a matter of fact, translations are always the best criteria to examine the translating method. So in order to further illustrate this point, in this chapter, we will compare and analyze three Chinese versions of *A Psalm of Life* written by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

1. A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE THREE CHINESE VERSIONS OF A PSALM OF LIFE

1.1 The background of the poem

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow is one of the most outstanding American romantic poets in the 19th century. His poetry enjoyed a high reputation and won great popularity for its plain diction, beautiful rhyme and clear pattern of rhythm. *A Psalm of Life*, composed in 1835, is one of his masterpieces. It consists of nine four-line stanza, each being a quatrain with a fairly regular rhythm (mostly trochaic tetrameters with a few iambics trimeters) and rhyming pattern (a b a b). The positive and upbeat attitude towards life is conveyed naturally in the poem through the use of rhetorical figures such as allusion, comparison.

A Psalm of Life is generally accepted by the academia as the first English poem that has been translated into Chinese. The earliest one in record is Thomas Francis Wade's translation in 1865, and on the basis of which, one of Wade's best Chinese friends Dong Xun (董恂) worked out his own version. Dong Xun was one of the main officials of the Foreign Affairs Board (總理各國事務衙門), but he did not know the ABC of English language. His translation version is in a fixed pattern of seven characters under the same title as Thomas Francis Wade's version, i.e. Renshengsong (《人生頌》). After that, many talented Chinese translators have tried their gifts in translating this poem with their own distinctive characteristics. Among those translated versions, three typical ones will be chosen for the comparative analysis in the following section. These three Chinese versions are respectively translated by Dong Xun (董恂), Su Zhongxiang (蘇仲翔) and Yang Deyu (楊德豫).

1.2 A Comparative analysis of the three Chinese versions of *A Psalm of Life*

According to the analysis of theoretical study concerning poem translation in the above chapter, there is a consensus that the highest standard of poem translation is the "three-beauty" principle proposed by Xu Yuanhong. So in this section we will compare the three Chinese versions from three aspects, namely, the "form beauty", the "sound beauty" and the "sense beauty". For the sake of convenience, the three Chinese versions are numbered as follows: version 1 translated by Dong Xun; version 2 translated by Su Zhongxiang; version 3 translated by Yang Deyu.

1.2.1 A Comparative analysis of the "form beauty"

Zhu Guangqian (1987), a famous aesthetician once said, "Form is an essential part of poetry". Poetry, as the gem of literature, is a unity which combines sound, form and sense perfectly. By form, we include line length, verse pattern, repetition of words, parallelism in structure, etc. Xu Yuanhong (1997) holds that if the original line is long, the translator should not shorten it in his version, nor lengthen it if the original is short. That's to say, if the version is not close to the original in form, it may seem not as beautiful as the original. The original poem consists of nine stanzas and four lines in each stanza. Take the first stanza of the original poem as an example:

Tell me not in mournful numbers,
Life is but an empty dream!
For the soul is dead that slumbers,
And things are not what they seem

It consists of four lines and each line is composed of different numbers of words.

Version 1 by Dong Xun and Version 2 by Su Zhongxiang are both in the form of classical Chinese verse. Version 1 consists of nine stanzas and each stanza is composed in the form of seven-character-quatrain (七言絕句). So the first stanza of the original poem is translated as follows in the version 1:

莫將煩惱著詩篇
百歲原如一覺眠
夢短夢長同是夢
獨留真氣滿乾坤

In version 1, the stanza is translated in form of seven-character-quatrain (七言絕句), which consist of four lines as the original poem but the number of Chinese characters is equal with seven characters in each line.

Version 2 consists of nine stanzas and each stanza is composed in the form of five-character-quatrain (五言絕句). And the first stanza of the original poem is translated as follows in the version 2:

莫唱傷感調，
夢幻是人生！
須知靈魂睡，
所見非本真。

The form of the version is quite similar to the version 1, and the only difference lies in the number of the character in each line. It's clear that the each line includes five character in version while seven in version 1.

So in the version 1 and version 2, both translators transferred the original form into classical Chinese verse naturally and made appropriate adjustments based on the original poem. In that sense, even though the forms of the two versions are different from the original one, they are still acceptable and understandable because the majority of Chinese readers are quite familiar with those forms. The third version by Yang Deyu is translated in the form of modern *Baihua* (modern vernacular Chinese) metrical verse. It includes nine stanzas and each stanza contains four lines which are varied in the number of characters. And in the version 3 the first stanza of the original poem is translated as follows:

不要在哀傷的詩句裏對我說
人生不過一場幻夢！——
昏睡的靈魂等於是死的，
事物的真相和外表不同

This kind of poetic form is not as regular as the traditional classical Chinese verse, but it maintains the flavor of western poetry to a higher degree. As a matter of fact, this kind of poetic form in the history of Chinese literature originated from the poem translation, and since the May 4th New Literature Movement in 1919, it has been widely accepted and appreciated by Chinese readers for its combination of Chinese poetic style and western flavor. To some extent, compared with the other two versions in the form of classical Chinese verse, the form of Version 3 is more preferable as the translation of poetry in the eyes of modern Chinese reader due to its trace of western poetic style.

1.2.2 A Comparative analysis of the “sound beauty”

It's well known that poetry calls for the beauty not only in form, but also in sound, so does poem translation. By sound in the poetry, we mainly include rhyme and rhythm. The original poem was composed with a fairly regular rhythm (mostly trochaic tetrameters, with a few iambic trimeters) and rhyming pattern (a b a b). For example, the fourth stanza of the original poem is in the rhyming pattern of a b a b.

Art is long, and Time is fleeting,
And our hearts, though stout and brave,

Still, like muffled drums, are beating
Funeral marches to the grave

In version 1, the translator reproduced the rhyming pattern in the translation, each stanza is composed in the rhyming scheme of a b a, so the fourth stanza of the original poem is translated as follows in the version 1:

無術揮戈學魯陽
枉談肝膽異尋常
一從薤露歌聲起
丘隴無人宿草荒

Even though its rhyming pattern is quite different from that of the original poem, on the whole, as a poem, it is still quite fluent and natural. The rhyme and rhythm of the version 2 are also changed completely due to the limitations and regulations of classical Chinese verse. But on the whole, they are acceptable because the reproduction of the new pattern of rhyme and rhythm meets the demand of classical Chinese verse.

In the version 3 by Yang Deyu, the rhyming scheme is a b c b, which is quite natural even though a little bit different form that of the original poem. With regard to the pattern of rhythm, the translator creatively replaced the foot of English in the original poem with *dun*(頓) of Chinese to reproduce the pattern of the rhythm in the translation. As a matter of fact, the concept of *dun*(頓) is raised in the modern *Baihua*(modern vernacular Chinese) verse. To define it briefly, *dun*(頓) is a kind of semantic as well as phonological unit comprising usually two or three characters, which is in accordance with the preference of two- or three- character words and expressions in the vernacular Chinese. The concept of *dun*(頓) is a very important rhythm unit in *Baihua* poetry. For example, two lines of a poem, “那些時辰曾經用輕盈的細工，織就這眾目共注的可愛明眸” could be divided as follows with *dun*(頓), “那些/時辰/曾經用/輕盈的/細工，織就這/眾目/共注的/可愛/明眸”. The method of replacing English foot with Chinese *dun* successfully solves the sharp phonological differences between Chinese and English and reproduces the beauty of original poem in the translation. So the fourth stanza of the original poem is translated as follows:

藝術/永恆，時光/飛逝
我們的/心，雖然/勇敢/堅決，
仍然像/悶聲的/鼓，它/正在
伴奏/向墳墓/送葬的/哀樂。

In the Chinese version, the number of *dun*(頓) is equal to that of the foot in the original poem., and thus the pattern of rhythm is well preserved. In that sense, The method of replacing English foot with Chinese *dun*(頓) achieved satisfactory results. On the whole, in respect of rhythm and rhyme, the version 3 creatively

takes the advantage of sound beauty of Chinese and maintains the special glamour of the original poem in the pattern of rhythm and rhyme.

1.2.3 A Comparative analysis of the “sense beauty”

The sense is an essential component of a poem, so if the works of translation cannot retain the sense and spirit of the original poem, they can never be regarded as well-done. So in the following section, we will make a comparative analysis of the three versions from the angle of preservation of the original sense.

In the world of western literature, *A Psalm of Life* written by Longfellow is regarded as a didactic piece because this poem demonstrates a kind of spiritual enlightenment, philosophy of life as well as emotional encouragement, and the main theme of the poem is the positive and upbeat attitude towards life.

Going through the version 1 by Dong Xun, one can constantly detect the traces of other famous poetic lines written by poets of ancient China. For example, “天地生材總不虛” will definitely remind one of Li Bai’s (李白) “天生我才必有用”; “靈性常存無絕期” will also associate one’s thought with Bai Juyi’s (白居易) “此恨綿綿無絕期”; “無術揮蓋學魯陽” in the fourth stanza is clearly an illusion to Li Bai’s “魯陽何德，駐景揮戈”. Therefore, evaluated from the Chinese readers’ point of view, this version is quite idiomatic with great readability. However, beautiful as it is, the translation is after all what western translator call “an infidel beauty” because some lines mislead readers to an understanding widely divergent from the meaning of the original text. For instance, “已去冥鴻亦有跡，雪泥爪印認分明” in the seventh stanza is obviously an allusion to Su Shi’s (蘇軾) “泥上偶然留指爪，鴻飛哪復計東西”. The main idea of those well known lines of Su Shi is that traces of life are just like swan geese’s footprints in snowfields, which appear accidentally and then vanish soon, so what permeates between the lines is a passive and disconsolate mood. However, such an emotion is totally different from that in the original text:

Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us,
Footprints on the sands of time.

From those four lines, it is clear that what Longfellow wants to say is actually that one should try his best to make his life significant and worth living, and the mood here is positive and enterprising. As a result, Dong’s translation sharply betrays the original text in this case. What’s more, the diction of the translation is too archaic to be accepted and understood by readers, especially by modern readers. Consequently, it also spoils the sense and spirit of the original poem. So evaluated on the whole, the translation fails to convey

the bravery and optimism in the original poem due to translator’s misunderstanding of the original poem.

Su Zhongxiang’s version is basically faithful to the meaning of the original poem. The most distinctive feature of the translation is its concise diction since it is translated in the form of classical Chinese verse, which has strict regulations on the numbers of characters in each line. However, on the other hand, concise diction also causes ambiguity or misleading in the translation. In many cases of translation, in order to meet the requirement of form and sound pattern in the classical Chinese verse, translator often sacrifice or ruin the original sense of the poem. For instance, the third line of the first stanza of the poem is translation as “須知靈魂睡”，but it cannot convey the original meaning that a person whose soul slumbers is spiritually dead. The lines such as “生死皆垢塵” and “豈非指靈魂” are ambiguous to readers since their wording is too vague.

The third version by Yang Deyu is composed in modern vernacular Chinese. The diction is clear and idiomatic, and thus the original meaning is conveyed clearly and accurately. What’s more worthy of mention is that the language used in the translation is not only clear and idiomatic but also maintains the flavor of English language. For example, in this version, the phrase “the sands of time” is directly translated as “時間的沙”. As a matter of fact, it is an excellent metaphor, which indicates the whole period of life because ancient people used glasshour, an instrument made of sands to record time. So the translation in version 3 conveys the flavor of western culture to Chinese readers, and now many Chinese writers have quoted this metaphor in their writing.

Going through the whole translation, the diction and expression are plain but appropriate and clear as the original poem, so readers can deeply perceive the positive and upbeat attitude towards life in the original poem. In that sense, version 3 by Yang Deyu succeeds in preserving the sense and inspiring spirit of the original poem.

2. FURTHER DISCUSSION ON THE STANDARDS OF POEM TRANSLATION

Through the comparative analysis, it is clear that a good translation of poem should preserve the sense and spirit of the original poem in the form of poem and expressions that are acceptable to readers of the target language. So in that sense, the process of poem translation actually is the process of realizing the equivalence of sense and form between English and Chinese. However, due to vast differences between Chinese and English, absolute equivalence in the sense and form is hard or even impossible to achieve. Thus, in that case, the best solution to the problem is to apply the

principle of “Dynamic Equivalence” to the poem translation.

2.1 The “Dynamic Equivalence” and poem translation

According to Eugene A. Nida (2001), translation consists of reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalence of the source language. However, there are vast differences between two languages and cultural backgrounds, so absolute equivalence is hard or even impossible to achieve. In order to mediate the conflicts between two languages and cultures, Nida first proposed the famous principle of “Dynamic Equivalence”, according to which a translator seeks to translate the meaning of the original in such a way that the source language wording will trigger the same impact on the receptor–language audience as the original wording does upon the source-text audience (Nida, 2001). In short, equivalence should be the equivalence of the effect. That’s to say, the effect the target text exerts on the target readers should be equivalent to that effect the source text exerts on the source readers. But source-language readers and target-language readers are immersed in quite different cultural backgrounds, so in order to achieve similar response, translators must make adjustments accordingly. The principle of “Dynamic Equivalence” broadens our horizon within the field of translation, and it is extremely useful for poem translation.

3. CONCLUSION

In view of the tasks of poetic translation mentioned above, I would like to put forward the following suggestions for the proper translation of poetry.

First of all, spiritual resemblance should have priority over formal resemblance. In the process of poetic translation, the conflict between content and form will be sharp, and when there is no happy compromise, meaning must have priority over style. Sacrifice of meaning for the sake of reproducing the form may fail to communicate the message implicated in the original poem and thus the foremost task of poem translation cannot be fulfilled. However, the form may be changed more radically than the content and still be equivalent in its effect upon the receptors. So correspondence in meaning must have priority over correspondence in the form in the poem translation.

Second, the form of the original poetry should be preserved but could be adjusted creatively according to style of the poetry in target language. That is to say, the poetry should be translated in the form of poem, otherwise the aesthetic appeal of the poem will be spoiled a lot, but it is not necessary to imitate the form of the original poem completely.

Third, the sound pattern including the rhythm and rhyme of the original poem should be kept creatively by making good use of the linguistic advantages of the target language. As matter of fact, the innovative method of replacing English foot with Chinese dun(頓) is a good solution to mediate the sharp phonological differences between Chinese and English. In this way, the “sound beauty” is achieved successfully in the translation.

Fourth, in the process of poem translation, translators should build up the awareness of “readers’ response”, aiming at achieving “Dynamic Equivalence” both in the sense and form. That is to say, while translating the original poem, translators should have their targeted readership in their minds and then make adjustments according to readers’ decoding ability and potential interests. Those adjustments mainly include the lexical and syntactic changes of the diction and overall structure of the original poem. To be more specific, for modern readership, the translator should avoid some archaic expressions in the translation and the form of the modern Baihua metrical verse is one of the best choices at the present time.

The four points mentioned above are the basic principles and methods of poem translation concluded in my paper on the basis of the comparative analysis of the poem—*A Psalm of Life* and the review of the related translating theories. It’s my sincere hope that they could be helpful for the practice of poem translation in the future.

Finally, to conclude this paper, I would like to cite Dane Gabriel Rosseti(1999): “the true motive for putting poetry into a fresh language must be to endow a fresh nation, as far as possible, with one more possession of beauty”. Anyway, as it is believed by many theorists, poem translation is “a cause filled with pities”, maybe, what we can do is simply to keep exerting ourselves to reduce these pities to the least amount.

Appendix :

The original poem of *A Psalm of Life*

A PSALM OF LIFE

1) Tell me not in mournful numbers,
Life is but an empty dream!
For the soul is dead that slumbers,
And things are not always they seem.

2) Life is real! Life is earnest!
And the grave is not its goal;
Dust thou art, to dust returnest,
Was not spoken of the soul.

3) Not enjoyment, and not sorrow,
Is our destined end or way;
But to act, that each tomorrow
Find us farther than to-day.

4) Art is long, and Time is fleeting,
And our hearts, though stout and brave,
Still, like muffled drums, are beating
Funeral marches to the grave.

5) In the world's broad field of battle,
Be not like dumb, driven cattle!
Be a hero in the strife!

In the bivouac of Life,
6) Trust no Future, howe'er pleasant!
Let the dead Past bury its dead!
Act—act in the living Present!
Heart within and God o'er-head!

7) Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time.

8) Footprints that perhaps another,
Sailing o'er life's solemn main,
A forlorn and shipwrecked brother,
Seeing, shall take heart again.

9) Let us, then, be up and doing,
With a heart for any fate,
Still achieving, still pursuing,
Learn to labour and to wait.

DONG XUN' VERSION (VERSION 1)

《人生頌》

1) 莫將煩惱著詩篇
百歲原如一覺眠
夢短夢長同是夢
獨留真氣滿乾坤

2) 天地生材總不虛
由來豹死尚留皮
縱然出土仍歸土
靈性常存無絕期

3) 無端憂樂日相循
天命斯人自有真
人法天行強不息
一時功業一時新

4) 無術揮戈學魯陽
枉談肝膽異尋常
一從薤露歌聲起
丘隴無人宿草荒

5) 擾擾紅塵聽鼓聲
駑駘甘待鞭笞下
騏驎誰能轡勒羈
風吹大漠草萋萋

6) 休道將來樂有時
可憐往事不堪思
只今有力均須努
人力殫時天佑之

7) 千秋萬代遠蜚聲
學步金龜頂上行

已去冥鴻亦有跡
雪泥爪印認分明

8) 茫茫塵世海中瀝
才過來舟又去舟
欲問失風誰挽救
沙洲遺跡可追求

9) 一鞭從此躍征鞍
不到峰頭心不甘
日進日高還日上
肯教中道偶停驂

SU ZHONGXIANG'S VERSION (VERSION 2)

《生之贊歌》

1) 莫唱傷感調：
夢幻是人生！
須知靈魂睡，
所見非本真。

2) 生命真而誠？
墳墓非止境；
生死皆垢塵，
豈是指靈魂。

3) 逸樂與憂傷，
均非天行健；
君子當自強，
翌日勝今天。

4) 光陰似白駒，
學藝垂千秋；
雄心如悶鼓，
葬曲伴荒丘。

5) 世界一戰場，
人生一軍營；

莫效牛馬走，
奮發斯英雄！

6) 莫信未來好，
過去任埋葬。
努力有生時，
心誠祈上蒼！

7) 偉人洵不朽，
我亦能自強，
鴻爪留身後，
遺澤印時光。

8) 或有飄零人，
苦海中沉浮，
睹我足印時，
哀心又振奮。

9) 眾生齊奮發，
順逆不介意；
勤勉而戒躁，
探索又進取。

YANG DEYU'S VERSION (VERSION 3)

《人生禮贊》

1) 不要在哀傷的詩句對我說，
人生不過一場幻夢！——
昏睡的靈魂等於是死的，
事物的真相與外表不同。

2) 人生是真切的！人生是實在的！
它的歸宿並不是荒墳；
“你本是塵土，仍要歸於塵土”，
這話說的並不是靈魂。

3) 我們命定的目標和道路，
不是享樂，也不是受苦，
而是行動，在每個明天，
都要比今天前進一步。

4) 藝術永恆，時光飛逝，
我們的心，雖然勇敢堅決，
仍然像悶聲的鼓，它正在
伴奏向墳墓送葬的哀樂。

5) 在這世界的遼闊戰場上，
在這人生的營帳中；

莫學那聽人驅策的啞畜，
要做一個戰鬥中的英雄！

6) 別指靠將來，不管他多迷人！
讓已逝的過去永遠埋葬！
行動吧，——趁著現在的時光！
良知在心中，上帝在頭上！

7) 偉大的生平昭示我們：
我們能夠生活得高尚，
而當告別人世的時候，
留下腳印在時間的沙上。

8) 也許我們會有一個弟兄，
航行在莊嚴的人生大海，
船隻沉沒了，絕望的時候，
會看到這腳印而振作起來。

9) 那麼，讓我們幹起來吧，
對任何命運抱英雄氣概；
不斷地進取，不斷地追求，
要學會勞動，學會等待。

REFERENCES

- Nida, E.A. *Language, Culture and Translation* [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2001.
Rosseti, D.G. *Transplanting the Seed: Poetry and Translation* [M]. London: Cromwell Press, 1999.
朱光潛. *朱光潛全集* [M]. 合肥: 安徽教育出版社, 1987.
郭著章, 李慶生. *英漢互譯實用教程* [M]. 武漢: 武漢大學出版, 2003.
楊德豫. *朗費羅詩選* [M]. 北京: 中國人民文學出版社, 1959.
許淵沖. *翻譯的藝術* [M]. 北京: 中國對外翻譯出版社, 1984.
許淵沖. *論英韻漢語詩歌* [M]. 北京: 北京大學出版社, 1997.

THE AUTHOR

Bu Jing, Postgraduate, English Department of Central China Normal University, Wuhan, Hubei, 430079, P.R. China.