

An Analysis of the English Translations of *The Inscription of the Humble Chamber* from the Perspective of Three Beauties Theory

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Abstract: *The Inscription of the Humble Chamber* is a masterpiece of Liu Yuxi, a famous Chinese poet in Tang dynasty. It is the crystallization of the wisdom of Chinese culture and represents the spirit and integrity of the Chinese nation. This paper aims to compare and analyze the three English translations of the poem by Luo Jingguo, Xu Jingcheng and Stephen Owen from the perspective of Xu Yuanchong's "Three Beauties Theory": "beauty of form", "beauty of Sound" and "beauty of sense". The comparison reveals that the three translations have their own strengths and weaknesses. By analyzing the three translations from the perspective of the "Three Beauties Theory", this paper manages to explore the effective inspiration for the translation practice of Chinese cultural texts.

Keywords: *The Inscription of the Humble Chamber*; Three Beauties Theory; Translation Comparison

1. Introduction

The Inscription of the Humble Chamber^[1] by Liu Yuxi (772-842), alias Liu Mengde, a noted poet, philosopher and statesman in the Tang Dynasty (618 -907), can be regarded as a quintessence of ancient Chinese literature. It has endured for thousands of years without fading. The author Liu Yuxi received his bachelor's degree and participated in the Yongzhen Reform with a passion for serving the country. After the failure of the reform, he was relegated to Anhui province, subject to people's difficulties, living in dire straits, so he wrote *The Inscription of the Humble Chamber* and made a sensation. The author expresses his high aspirations of morality, enjoyment of poverty and happiness, and hatred to the sordid world through the whole text of 81 words. Its remarkable feature lies in its incisive language,

rich rhetorical devices like neat antithesis, sharp contrast, mutual foil and quotations from classics^[2]. *The Inscription of the Humble Chamber* has become a popular masterpiece and is one of the earliest classical Chinese poems translated into foreign languages. In this paper, three versions of the English translation of this work are to be analyzed, i.e., Luo Jingguo's translation, Xu Jingcheng's translation, and Stephen's translation.

2. Xu Yuanchong and his "Three Beauties Theory"

"Three Beauties Theory" was propounded by the eminent Chinese translator Xu Yuanchong (1921-2021) in 1979. The theory suggests that the translation of poetry should retain "three beauties" in the original poem, namely, beauty in sense, beauty in sound, and beauty in form. The theory also has its theoretical roots in the concept of "beauties" proposed by Lu Xun (1881-1936). In the first chapter *From Characters to Articles* in the handout *The Outline of the History of Chinese Literature* that Lu Xun compiled for Xiamen University in 1926, he wrote that "Chinese characters has three beauties: Beauty of sense that touches the heart, beauty of sound that attracts the ear, and beauty of form that arrests the eye."^[3] According to Xu Yuanchong, the translated poems should also strive to achieve the beauty of the original poems, to move the readers' hearts as much as the original poems, i.e., the beauty of sense; to have the same pleasant rhythm as the original poems, i.e., the beauty of sound; and to keep the form of the original poems as much as possible (e.g., the length, the contrasts, etc.), i.e., the beauty of form. For the relationship between the three beauties, Xu Yuanchong pointed out that "the beauty of sense is the most important; the beauty of sound is the second and the beauty of form is the third."^[4] He believes that it is best to reflect the beauty of sound and form while

realizing the beauty of sense in its entirety, so as to achieve all three beauties. If the three beauties cannot be achieved, then at least the beauty of form and sound should be conveyed as far as possible.

The “Three Beauties Theory” discussed by Xu Yuanchong are not only the consideration of the translation itself, but also the feeling and realization of the aesthetic object, and the specific interpretation of the aesthetic value of the original work. It can be said that Xu Yuanchong captures the most essential issue of literary translation, especially poetry translation, which is the basic characteristics of the aesthetic activity of literary translation.^[5] As Wang Guowei’s saying that “all words of scenery are words of emotion”, that is, the articles often have meanings outside the words, or even feelings outside the words, which refers to one of the major features of ancient Chinese poetry and literature. Literary translation is different from general translation. General translation only needs to solve the problem of “truth” or “faith” or “likeness”, while literary translation needs to solve the contradiction between them.^[6] Poetry translation is a challenging art, and the translator must not only be proficient in two languages, but also have literary perception and creativity, maintaining the artistic conception, sound and shape of the original poem, so that it is equally vivid and beautiful in the target language.^[7]

This paper makes a comparative analysis of the three versions of *The Inscription of the Humble Chamber* from the perspective of the “Three Beauties Theory”, which can not only feel the unique aesthetic experience brought about by cultural transmission, but also prove that the “Three Beauties Theory” has an important guiding significance for the translation of poems.

3. The Comparison of the Three Translations from the Perspective of “Three Beauties Theory”

3.1 Beauty in Form

Chinese ancient poems emphasize on the form of neat and precise dialogues, and antithesis, while the characteristics of the English language make it difficult to translate Tang poems with the same short and neat sentences, so many translators choose to translate poems

in prose. However, the prose style is characterized by a variety of words and phrases, which can be long or short, and is not quite in line with the neatness and symmetry of ancient poems. Therefore, Xu Yuanchong preferred to translate poems in poetic style, such as translating seven-character poems in Alexandrian style with 12 syllables per line, and translating five-character poems in heroic style with 10 syllables per line in iambic pentameter. The perfect reproduction of form beauty refers to the neatness of the poem’s antithesis. The lengths of the verses and lines are neatly arranged, so that the external form of the poem can bring visual enjoyment and form beauty to the readers. In this way, the translated poems are neatly matched and have the beauty of form. The specific case analyses are as follows.

Example 1:

ST: shān bù zài gāo, yǒu xiān zé míng. shuǐ bù zài shēn, yǒu lóng zé líng.

TT1: A mountain needn’t be high; It is famous so long as there is a deity on it. A lake needn’t be deep; It has supernatural power so long as there is a dragon in it. (Luo’s version)

TT2: Renowned will be a hill if angles live, regardless of its being high or low. Ensouled will be a lake if dragons live, in spite of its being deep or shallow. (Xu’s version)

TT3: A mount needs not be high; it becomes noted when on it fairies dwell. A body of water needs not be deep; it would be ensouled if a dragon makes it its resting whereabouts. (Stephen’s version)

The source language is the opening sentence of the inscription (ming wen), with a four-word structure, a contrasting phrase, and the second and fourth lines are rhymed, in which the author introduces the main idea by illustrate the images of hill and water. All the three translations are in four lines of verse. From the point of view of beauty in form, Xu Jingcheng’s translation is equipped with more neat antithesis. First, the length of the four lines is almost the same. Line one and three rhyme with “live”, and line two and four rhyme with “low”. Besides, the use of “renowned”, “regardless” at the beginning of the first and second sentence, and “ensouled” “in” at the beginning of the third and fourth lines are applied as alliteration. What’s more, the sentence structure is “If” subordinate clauses is corresponding perfectly and the use

of synonyms “regardless of” and “in spite of” cause an effect of repetition. It is shown that Xu’s version is a perfect fit with the original poem in form beauty. As for Luo Jingguo’s translation version, he uses the parallel sentence structure “.....needn’t.....so long as there is a.....,” with suitable antithesis and line two and four are rhymed, reproducing the form beauty of the original poem. Compared with Xu’s translation, Luo’s translation fails to reflect the four-word structure of the original poem well. Stephen uses “...needs not be.....when/if.....” parallel sentences, basically follow the rules of antithesis but without rhyme. This version is more like a prose one but not a poem.

In conclusion, from the analysis of beauty in form, Xu’s translation is better than Luo’s, and Stephen’s, namely Stephen’s version has the weakest degree of form beauty. Luo’s translation mainly uses subject-verb-object structure additions and subject-subject-table structure to supplement the subject, add articulators, and supplement semantics through there be sentence patterns. Xu’s translation mainly adopts inversion with a large number of combined translations, mostly by means of paraphrase, with concise words and a civilized translation. Stephen’s translation mainly adopts the subject-verb-object structure and the subject-subject-table structure, and mostly uses the passive voice, which is less accurate in semantic expression.

3.2 Beauty in Sound

Xu Yuanchong believed that the translation of a poem should not only convey the meaning of the original poem, but also convey its sound as much as possible. The beauty of sound is mainly reflected in the musicality of the poem. The entry point of phonological coherence is repetition, which is mainly manifested in English poetry as syllabic repetition and iambic repetition, and the phonological coherence constructed by the two kinds of repetition assumes different poetic functions.^[8] The sonic beauty of classical Chinese poetry creation is mainly reflected in the rhyme of the poem. In Chinese language, the rhythmic and staccato tones of Chinese characters are mainly reflected in poetry through rhyming, leveling, and sentence contrasts; while the phonetic beauty of English poetry is mainly reflected in the forms of meter, rhyme,

alliteration, and rhythm. Therefore, in the process of translating classical Chinese poetry, it is difficult for the translator to convey the rhythmic beauty of Chinese poetry directly to the readers of the translated language, and the translator can only reproduce the rhythmic beauty of Chinese poetry through the rhythmic form of English poetry.

The rhythmic beauty of ancient texts can also be reflected by the iambic pentameter in English poetry. As for rhyming, Xu Yuanchong advocated the use of rhymes similar to those in the original text, so as to show the unique rhythmic beauty of poetry by changing rhymes. Besides, alliteration, assonance and repetitions are common means to use. The way the original poem is pronounced can be simulated by the corresponding pronunciation in English. The flexible use of multiple means makes it possible to maximize the artistic musical effect of the original poem. The translation example is as follows:

Example 2:

ST: wú sī zhú zhī luàn ěr, wú àn dú zhī lǎo xíng.

TT1: Without the disturbance of the noisy that jar on the ears, or the solemn burden of reading official documents. (Luo’s version)

TT2: Never are we troubled by noisy string and flute sound; Nor are we fatigued by heavy official files around. (Xu’s version)

TT3: But there are without riotous strings and pipes to confuse the ears, and tedious official documents to ring quietude’s knell. (Stephen’s version)

The lines are applied with antithesis, with six Chinese words in each sentence, meaning “No noisy music disturbs my ears, and no official documents tire my body”. Luo Jingguo uses “without.....or.....” style to translate the antithetical lines, with fourteen syllables in each line. And a lot of /d//b/m/n/ phonemes are used, which gives the translation a sense of rhythm and rhyme. Xu Jingcheng’s translation uses the sentence form “Never are we.....nor are we.....”, and each line has 12 syllables and the word “sound” and “around” in the two lines are rhymed. Xu’s version is perfectly correspond to the six-word structure of the original. The repetition of the same word “are we” and the synonyms “troubled by” and “fatigued by” increase the rhythm of the lines. Besides, the abundant use of alliteration such as “never” “nor” “string” “sound” “fatigue”

and “files” increase the musicality of the poem, which makes it catchy to read and reproduces the rhythmic and phonetic beauty of the original text. In contrast, Stephen’s translation is longer and slightly redundant, with two lines of different lengths and numbers of syllables. The prose-oriented translation can explain the contents of the original text, but lack in reproducing phonological beauty. On the whole, Xu Jingcheng’s translation is the best from the view of sound beauty.

3.3 Beauty in Sense

Table 1. Comparison of Word Choices in the Three Translations

	Luo’s Version	Xu’s Version	Stephen’s Version
shì	home	hut	cell
míng	epigraph	ode	eulogium
shān	mountain	hill	mount
xiān	deity	angels	faries
shuǐ	lake	lake	water
lóng	dragon	dragons	dragon
lián	bamboo curtains	screens	screen
hóng rú	erudite scholars	the erudite	renowned scholars
bái dīng	unlearned common man	the illiterate	the rough and gross
sù qín	plainly decorated qín	the lyre	plain heptachord
jīn jīng	the Buddhist Scriptures	the sutra	golden classics
sī zhú	noisy tones	string and flute	strings and pipes
àn dú	official documents	official files	official documents
zhū gě lú	the thatched hut of Zhuge Liang	Zhuge’s thatched hut	Zhuge’s recluse cottage
zǐ yún tíng	the Pavilion Ziyun	Yang Xiong’s arbor	Yang Xiong’s hermit arbour

The beauty in sense is the most important point in poetry translation, and it is the consensus of the translation community that the translator should translate the content and mood of the poem. The beauty of form and sound reflects the external expression of the poem, while the beauty of sense focuses on the inner meaning of the poem. Ancient Chinese poets were good at using multiple techniques, such as diction, derivation, symbolism, and puns, which led to ancient Chinese poems

being very implicit in their expressions and meanings. So it is not desirable to translate poems only in terms of the surface meaning of the verses and ignore the deeper meaning. Accurate translation of deeper meanings requires the translator to read and understand the real meaning of the poem and to understand the Chinese-English equivalent expressions. The translator should accurately grasp the style and mood of the poem, such as sentimental or romantic, painful or joyful. When the translated poem and the original poem are in the same emotional mood, the beauty of the meaning can be approximately achieved.

Xu Yuanchong put forward the “Three Transformations Theory” as the basic translation method to realize the sense beauty, including deepening, superficialization and equalization. As shown in Table 1, it chooses 15 images in the poem and lists different ways of word choices in the three translation versions.

The “Three Beauties Theory” is the ontology of poetry translation, while the “Three Transformations Theory” is the methodology of poetry translation^[9]. There are also some specific examples below.

Example 3:

ST: “lòu shì míng”

TT1: An Epigraph in Praise of My Humble Home (Luo’s version)

TT2: Ode to the Humble Hut (Xu’s version)

TT3: An Eulogium on a Humble Cell (Stephen’s version)

“Inscription (ming)” was originally engraved on metal instruments and monuments in ancient times to describe the life story of some praise or cautionary words, mostly used to sing praises of virtues and show that the warning, and later gradually developed into an independent style.^[10] Due to the unique historical origin of this genre, it is characterized by its short length, simplicity and profound meaning. It is a practical writing style, and celebrates the humble home and the poet’s transcendent character traits. The Luo’s version translates “ming” into epigraph (mu zhi), a line of writing, short phrase, etc. on a building or statue, or as an introduction to part of a book, which points out that the poem is engraved on stone tablets and vividly reflects the theme of the poem is to praise “my humble home”. Version 1 is a better realization of the

cultural equivalence between Chinese and English. In translation 2, “ming” is translated as ode (song ge), a poem that speaks to a person or thing or celebrates a special event, which better embodies the theme and genre of poem and basically achieves cultural facsimile with shorter and clearer words, but some more subtle and deeper cultural connotations are not expressed. In translation 3, the word “ming” is translated as eulogium (song wen), a speech or piece of writing praising somebody/something very much, which is similar to the original artistic conception. And the word “cell” means a small room in a prison or police station where prisoners are kept, which reflects the poet’s situation that he was banished from the court but meanwhile misleads the target readers in some way.

Example 4:

ST: shān bù zài gāo, yǒu xiān zé míng. shuǐ bù zài shēn, yǒu lóng zé líng.

TT1: A mountain needn’t be high; It is famous so long as there is a deity on it. A lake needn’t be deep; It has supernatural power so long as there is a dragon in it. (Luo’s version)

TT2: Renowned will be a hill if angels live, regardless of its being high or low. Ensouled will be a lake if dragons live, in spite of its being deep or shallow. (Xu’s version)

TT3: A mount needs not be high; it becomes noted when on it fairies dwell. A body of water needs not be deep; it would be ensouled if a dragon makes it its resting whereabouts. (Stephen’s version)

“Mountain” and “water” are the most common images in the poem. The use of “lake” in translation 1 and 2 is more appropriate than “water” in translation 3. The use of “hill” in translation 2 is more appropriate than “mountain” and “mount” to reflect the meaning of the small and humble hill. Translation 1 translates “山” as deity (a god or goddess), translation 2 translates it as “angels” (a spirit who is believed to be a servant of God, and is sent by God to deliver a message or perform a task), and translation 3 translates it as “fairies” (a creature like a small person, who has magic powers). In the Chinese poem, the supernatural being is unique and refers to any gods and goddesses. Obviously, the word “deity” in translation 1 can better reproduce the meaning of the original poem. Besides, the connotation of “dragon” is different in Eastern and Western cultures. Westerners believe that

“dragon” is evil and will bring disaster, while Easterners, especially Chinese, believe that they are the descendants of the dragon and that the dragon is a kind of totem belief. Some scholars have mentioned the use of the word “long” instead, or have labeled this cultural difference. On this level, the use of “dragon” in all three translations is not very appropriate.

Example 5:

ST: kě yǐ diào sù qín, yuè jīn jīng.

TT1: I can enjoy playing my plainly decorated qin, or read the Buddhist Scriptures quietly. (Luo’s version)

TT2: Reading the sutra and playing the lyre (note: The sutra here means the Buddhist scriptures.) (Xu’s version)

TT3: Here plain table-heptachord could be plucked and golden classics read the worldly cares to quell. (Stephen’s version)

In Translation 1, Luo uses the transliteration method to translate “qín” as “qin”, in line with the foreignization strategy, which retains the original imagery but does not produce a clear counterpart for the target readers. While Xu uses the domestication strategy, translating it as lyre, a musical instrument of ancient Greece. In both translations 1 and 2, the original cultural imagery of the poem is appropriately reproduced. As for the word “jīn jīng”, in translation 1, “Buddhist scripture” is a broader sense and in translation 2, “sutras” is used to refer to specific Buddhist scriptures, which can be well reproduced in the original text and can be easily understood by the readers. Stephen’s direct translation of “plain table-heptachord” and “golden classics” does not reflect the original meaning of the poem and creates ambiguity for the readers so as to make a bad effect on communication.

Analyzing from the above examples, Luo’s and Xu’s translations are better than Stephen’s in terms of the beauty of sense. Although sinologists can express themselves precisely in English, Chinese scholars are better in terms of their understanding and knowledge of Chinese culture. The cultural differences between Chinese and English greatly increase the difficulty of translating poems, and the “Three Beauties Theory” has a strong guiding effect on the reproduction of poems’ beauty.

Poetry is often highly literary and artistic, and different languages and cultures have different metaphors and cultural backgrounds, and when translating, it is necessary to resolve cultural

differences to ensure that the target readers can understand. Therefore, translators need to recreate this literary quality while retaining the literary value and beauty of the original poem.

4. Conclusion

As a classic of ancient Chinese literature, it is of great significance to guide the English translation and dissemination of *The Inscription of the Humble Chamber* from the perspective of the Three Beauties Theory. This paper compares the three translations of Luo Jingguo, Xu Jingcheng and Stephen, and analyzes them from the three aspects of beauty of form, sound and sense. In terms of beauty of form, Xu's and Luo's translations are better, and they are more neat in terms of structure and rhyming; in terms of beauty of sound, Xu's translation is the best, and it can best reflect the original rhythm and musical effect of the poem, Luo's translation is second, and Stephen's translation is the last. In terms of meaning, each of the three translations has its own strengths. Stephen's translation is more accurate in terms of cultural transmission in terms of title's translation, and Luo's and Xu's translations are better in terms of specific verse translation, which can better reflect the beauty of Chinese culture's imagery and mood. In conclusion, in the process of translation, the translator should follow the "three beauties theory" to greatly convey the emotional connotation and spiritual realm conveyed by the original words, and strive to achieve "beauty of sense", "beauty of sound" and "beauty of form".

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