

A Study on the English Translation of Li Bai's Poetry from the Perspective of Deconstructionism and the Three Beauties Translation Theory: Taking Xu Yuanchong's English Translation Version as an Example

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Abstract:

Li Bai's poetry, as a brilliant gem of Chinese classical literature, whose English translation has always been an important topic in the field of translation. This paper takes the English translation of Li Bai by Xu Yuanchong as the research object, combines deconstructionist translation theory with Xu Yuanchong's "three Beauties" translation theory, to conduct an analysis from the three dimensions of word choice, rhyme construction, and image communication. The study found that the uncertainty of meaning and the subjectivity of the translator emphasized by deconstructivism were organically integrated with the beauty of meaning, sound and form pursued by the three beauties in Xu Yuanchong's translation practice: Xu Yuanchong breaks the shackles of "faithfulness" in traditional translation through creative rebellion, deconstructing the fixed meaning of the original text while reconstructing the aesthetic value of poetry in a way acceptable to the target language readers. My paper verifies the guiding significance of the combination of the two theories for the English translation of classical poetry through specific cases, providing a reference for the cross-cultural dissemination of Chinese classical poetry.

Keywords: Deconstructionism; Three Beauties; Poems by Li Bai; Xu Yuanchong; English Translation Studies

1. Introduction

Li Bai, a representative figure of romantic poetry in the Tang Dynasty of China, is known as the “Poet Immortal” for his works, which combine a bold and unrestrained style with profound cultural connotations. With the advancement of China’s cultural “going global” strategy, the English translation of Li Bai’s poetry has become an important vehicle for promoting cultural exchanges between China and the West. However, due to the significant differences in language systems and cultural backgrounds between China and English, how to retain the spiritual core of the original poem and convey its unique aesthetic value in the translation has always been a core challenge faced by translators [1].

Deconstructionist translation theory has had a profound impact on traditional translation concepts since it was introduced to China in the 1990s. The theory questions the “original-centered” and “fixed meaning” theories and emphasizes the subjectivity of the translator and the creativity of translation [2]. At the same time, Xu Yuanchong, a leading figure in Chinese translation, dedicated his life to the translation of classical poetry into English and proposed the famous “Three Beauties” translation theory, namely “beauty of meaning, beauty of sound, and beauty of form”, which provided important practical guidelines for the translation of classical poetry into English.

Existing studies have mostly analyzed the translation of poetry from the perspective of deconstructionism or the “three Beauties”, but have paid less attention to the complementarity of the two theories. For example, Wang Yingjie points out that deconstructivism’s deconstruction of the principle of “faithfulness” provides theoretical space for the translator’s creative translation, but does not specifically explore how to combine with “three beauties” to achieve the transmission of the aesthetic value of poetry [3]. Liu Xiajuan verified the role of deconstructionism in breaking the fixed meaning of the original text by comparing different translators’ English translations of “Will You Drink”, but did not systematically analyze its synergy with “Three Beauties” in practice [1]. Luo Xu and Yi Xiang mentioned in the visualization study that there is a potential connection between the two theories, but did not demonstrate in depth the specific guiding significance of their complementarity for the translation of classical poetry into English [2]. In fact, deconstructionism provides theoretical support for the practice of “Three beauties” - its deconstruction of the principle of “faithfulness” enables translators to pursue the aesthetic representation of poetry more freely; And “Three Beauty” provides a specific operational path for the creative translation of deconstructionism, avoiding translation from falling into

nihilism [3]. Therefore, this paper takes Xu Yuanchong’s English translation of Li Bai’s poetry as a case study and conducts research by combining two theories, which is of great theoretical and practical significance.

2. Interpretation of Core Theories

2.1 Deconstructivist Translation Theory

Deconstructivist translation theory was proposed by the French philosopher Derrida, and its core idea stems from a critique of the Western metaphysical “Logocentrism”. The traditional concept of translation holds that the original text is the source of meaning, and the translation should be faithful to the original text to achieve “equivalent” conversion; However, Derrida points out that the meaning of language is not fixed but is constantly generated through “differance” - there is no one-to-one correspondence between symbols and meaning, and the meaning of the text depends on the specific context and the reader’s interpretation [4]. This philosophical logic of meaning generation is not unique to language; similar to how deconstructivist concepts are transferred and reconstructed across disciplines like architecture, translation also realizes the transmutation of original meaning through cross-cultural interpretation [5].

In the field of translation, deconstructionism holds that first, the translation is not a “copy” of the original text, but rather a deconstruction and reconstruction of the original text based on the translator’s own understanding; Second, the translator has subjectivity, and their cultural background and way of thinking can influence the choice of translation strategy. This “creative rebellion” is not a betrayal of the original text, but an essential attribute of translation [6]. However, this subjectivity does not mean absolute dominance of the translator, as the translation activity essentially involves an ethical relationship between author, translator and reader, which should tend towards a “trilateral symbiosis” rather than one-sided centrality; Third, the value of translation does not lie in “restoring” the meaning of the original text, but in enriching the interpretive space of the original text through the “polysemy” of different translations [1,7]. For example, the image of “heaven” in Li Bai’s poetry may be interpreted by different translators as “heaven of nature”, “heaven of the sacred” or “heaven of destiny”, and this difference is a manifestation of the “openness of meaning” recognized by deconstructivism.

2.2 The Translation Theory of the Three Beauties

The “Three Americanism” was proposed by Xu Yuan-

chong in the 1980s and is the core principle of his translation practice. Xu Yuanchong clearly pointed out in “The

Art of Translation” that the “three beauties” are the beauty of meaning, sound and form (see Table 1) [6]:

Table 1 Exposition of the Three Beauties Theory of Translation

Italian and American (the core of the “Three Beauties”)	The translation should convey the emotions and artistic conception of the original text. For poetry, the beauty of meaning is its soul. The translator needs to have a deep understanding of the original poem’s ideological content to avoid losing deep emotions through literal translation.
Phonetic beauty	The translation should retain the rhythm of the original poem and, through rhyming and rhythmic means, provide the target language reader with a similar auditory experience to that of the original text reader. (English poetry often relies on rhymes, so Xu Yuanchong often uses rhyming patterns such as ABAB and AABB in his English translations.)
Form of beauty	The translation should take into account the sentence structure of the poem, retain as much as possible the formal features such as antithesis and parallelism of the original poem, so that readers can visually perceive the neat beauty of the poem.

Xu Yuanchong emphasizes that the “three beauties” are not in a parallel relationship - meaning beauty is the primary pursuit. If sound beauty, form beauty and meaning beauty conflict, sound beauty and form beauty can be appropriately abandoned, but on the premise of not damaging the core emotion of the original poem [8]. This theory, which integrates semantic transmission and aesthetic reproduction, provides a concrete criterion for translation criticism and appreciation, as it respects the aesthetic attributes of poetry and takes into account the differences between Chinese and English, offering a practical path for the translation of classical poetry into English [9].

3. Case Analysis: The Dual Theoretical Manifestations of Xu Yuanchong and Li Bai’s Poetry Translation

3.1 The Transmission Of Meaning And Beauty: Deconstructing Meaning and Reconstructing Emotion

The line “When life is good, enjoy it to the fullest; do not let the golden cup face the moon in vain” from Li Bai’s “Will You Drink” is a classic line that conveys his attitude of “enjoying life to the fullest”. The meaning of the word “delight” in the original poem is uncertain - it can refer to “the pleasure of having a wish fulfilled” or “the state of a smooth life”, and this openness of meaning provides the translator with deconstruction space [1].

Xu Yuanchong translated it as “When hopes are, oh! drink your fill in high delight; Do not let golden cups stand empty ‘gainst the moon! [8]” From a deconstructionist perspective, Xu’s choice to interpret “satisfaction” as “hopes are won” rather than “satisfaction in life” reflects the

translator’s active deconstruction of the original meaning - he did not pursue the “only correct” translation. Rather, based on his own understanding of Li Bai’s “unrestrained” style, he chose an interpretation that was more in line with the sentiment of “enjoying the moment”. From the perspective of “Three beauties”, this translation precisely conveys the beauty of the original poem: “drink your fill in high delight” directly presents the scene of drinking heartily, while expressing the bold and unrestrained emotions contained in the original poem to the fullest. “do not let golden cups stand empty” reinforces the cautionary meaning of “Do not empty the moon” and emphasizes the urgency of the act and the attitude towards life, allowing readers to feel the urgency and importance of “enjoying the moment”. It also gives the target language readers a direct sense of Li Bai’s carefree spirit.

3.2 Sound and Beauty Construction: Rhythm Deconstruction and English Reconstruction

Li Bai’s poetry often uses five-character or seven-character lines and emphasizes rhyming, such as “Thoughts on a Silent Night” “The bright moonlight before the bed, I doubt it is frost on the ground. The original poem rhymes “light”, “frost”, “hometown”, which is catchy to read. There are significant differences in rhyming systems between Chinese and English. The rhyming patterns in English poetry are different from those in Chinese. If Chinese rhymes are forcibly copied, it will lead to obscure translations [3].

Xu Yuanchong translated it as “In front of my bed there is bright moonlight; I take it for frost on the ground. I lift my head and look at the bright moon; “I lower my head and think of my hometown [4].” From a deconstructionist perspective, Xu did not adhere to the rhyming pattern of the original poem. Instead, he deconstructed the rhyme

structure of “single rhyme to the end” in Chinese and reconstructed the “ABCB rhyming” pattern of English poetry - “moonlight” rhymes similar to “moon”. “ground” and “hometown” rhymed at the end, conforming to the reading habits of English readers while retaining the rhythm of the original poem. From the perspective of the “three Beautists”, this translation achieves musical beauty: the repetition of phrases such as “bright moonlight” and “bright moon” creates a sense of auditory rhythm, and the use of rhymes makes the translation read smoothly and naturally, close to the musical beauty of the original poem.

3.3 Reappearance of Form: Sentence Structure Deconstruction and Form balance

In Li Bai’s “Viewing the Waterfall on Mount Lu”, “The waterfall plunges three thousand feet, as if the Milky Way had fallen from the ninth heaven” uses an exaggerated technique to show the grandeur of the waterfall. The original poem is in the form of seven-character lines, with neat antithesis and distinct form beauty. English is a linear language, and a literal translation of the seven-character sentence pattern would result in a lengthy translation that loses its conciseness [1].

Xu translated it as “The flying stream falls a thousand feet; As if the Silver River drops from heaven high [8].

From a deconstructionist perspective, Xu deconstructed the “seven-character symmetry” structure of the original poem, splitting it into two short English sentences to avoid the obscurity of long sentences in English; At the same time, he retained the exaggerated imagery of “a thousand feet” and “drops from heaven high”, achieving a balance between form and content. From the perspective of the “Three Beautists”, this translation takes into account the beauty of form: the two short sentences are of similar length, creating a sense of symmetry visually, and the noun phrase structure of “flying stream” and “Silver River” makes the sentence structure more orderly and close to the formal beauty of the original poem.

3.4 Comprehensive Case Analysis: The Embodiment of the Three Beauties in a Certain Verse

Take Li Bai’s “Early Departure from Baidicity” as an example: “Morning departure from Baidicity among the colorful clouds, a thousand miles of Jiangling returned in one day.” The original poem uses seven-character antithesis to show the speed of the journey and the magnificence of the scenery.

Xu Yuanchong translated it as “Leaving baidi at dawn in a rainbow of clouds; A thousand li to Jiangling, I return in a day [8]. (See Table 2 for the translation analysis)

Table 2 “Early Departure from Baidicheng” Translation Analysis

Italian and American	The translation accurately conveys the meaning of Leaving Baidicheng and quickly reaching Gangneung in the original poem through “leaving Baidicheng at dawn” and “I return in a day”. At the same time, “in a rainbow of clouds” adds to the beauty of the picture, allowing readers to experience the magnificent scene of the morning clouds swirling around. This is also in line with the view of Yang Yun and Wu Lingying that “the translation should convey the emotions of the original poem through imagery reconstruction. [10]”
The beauty of sound	The translation uses rhyming techniques. “clouds” and “day” are not completely rhyming, but “in a rainbow of clouds” and “A thousand li to Jiangling, I return in a day” form a harmonious rhythm in syllables. It reads smoothly and naturally, in line with the requirement of the “three beauties” theory that “sound and beauty should be adapted to the rhythm habits of the target language” [11].
Sound and beauty	The translation reproduces the antithesis beauty of the original poem through the symmetrical structure of two short sentences. “Leaving Bai-di at dawn” and “A thousand li to Jiangling” are similar in length and structure, creating a visual sense of balance and embodying the principle of “form beauty pursuing neat sentence structure” in the “Three beauties” theory [11].

4. Conclusions

This article combines deconstructionism and the translation theory of “Three Beauties” to conduct a study on Xu Yuanchong’s English translation of Li Bai’s poetry and reaches the following conclusions: First, deconstructionism provides theoretical legitimacy for the practice of

“Three Beauties” - its critique of “original text centrism” enables Xu Yuanchong to break free from the shackles of “faithfulness” and reconstruct the aesthetic value of poetry through creative rebellion; Second, “Three Beauties” provided a concrete path for the translation practice of deconstructionism, avoiding deconstruction from falling into “meaning nihilism”, and allowing the translation to retain

the core emotions and aesthetic features of the original poem while being open to interpretation; Third, Xu Yuanchong's translation practice proved that the combination of the two theories is an effective model for translating classical poetry into English - by deconstructing the fixed meaning of the original text and reconstructing the beauty of meaning, sound and form of the poetry, it enables the target language readers to have a deeper understanding of the charm of Li Bai's poetry.

There are still limitations in this study, such as focusing only on Xu Yuanchong's translation and not comparing it with other translators' versions. In the future, the scope of the study could be further expanded to compare the differences in translation strategies of different translators under the guidance of deconstructionism and "three beauties", providing richer references for the English translation of classical poetry.

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