

## A Study on the English Translation of Object-Chanting Poetry in Children's Poetry in Ancient China from the Perspective of the Three-Level Criteria of Poetry Translation

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**Abstract:** It is not hard to find plenty of children's poetry in ancient China, exhibiting children's creative contents and literary skills. Taking examples mainly from *Fifty Selected Children's Poetry in Ancient China: English Translation and Appreciation*, this paper applied the Three-Level Criteria of poetry translation by Dr. Wang Feng to analyze several English translations of children's object-chanting poetry in ancient China. In children's object-chanting poetry translation, at the macro-level, the criterion is Harmony; at the middle level, the theory of "resemblance in style, sense and poetic realm"; at the micro-level, the criteria of Eight Beauties, centered on the beauty of emotions and images. Based on these analyses, this paper aims to test the validity of the "Three-Level Criteria of poetry translation" and hopes to guide and promote the theoretical and practical studies on the English translation of children's poetry in ancient China from a new perspective.

**Keywords:** Children's Object-Chanting Poetry; English Translation; Three-Level Criteria; Criteria of Eight Beauties

### INTRODUCTION

Children's Literature Is An Important Field Of Study, And The English Translation Of Children's Literature Is An Important Part Of Children's Literature. As we

all know, there is a large amount of children's literature in English, such as *Snow White*, *Peter Pan*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and *The Little Prince*, which have been translated into Chinese and deeply loved by Chinese children. However, we have little knowledge about the translations of Chinese children's literature, not to mention Chinese children's poetry in ancient China.

Most researchers pay attention to children's literature, while few of them have carefully studied children's poetry, and there are few researches about the English translation of children's poetry. After studying many English translations of children's poetry, it can be seen that most of children's poetry are included in the Tang or Song poetry and could not be easily classified as an independent subject. However, Prof. Zhou Yongmo [1] edited a book related to English translations of children's poetry in ancient China, entitled *Fifty Selected Children's Poetry in Ancient China: English Translation and Appreciation*, from which the authors take the English translations of Chinese children's poetry as examples.

### The Three-Level Criteria of Poetry Translation

As differences exist between different languages and cultures, there must have disharmonies in the linguistic transformation and cultural communication in translation. As for the Chinese-English poetry translation, mainly analyzed are six disharmonies: artistic vs. scientific; lyrical vs. narrative; change in tones vs. stress in syllables; parataxis vs. hypotaxis; suggestiveness vs. decorativeness; uniformity vs. enjambment. In consideration of the six disharmonies, Dr. Wang Feng puts forward the Three-Level Translation Criteria for Poetry -- "Harmony -- Resemblance in Style, Sense and Poetic Realm -- Eight Beauties" Criteria. To be specific, the macro-level criterion is Harmony (Zhonghe), borrowing from the basic ideas of the Theory of Harmony (Hexie) by Prof. Zheng Hailing, the middle-level criterion is "Resemblance in Style, Sense and Poetic realm", inspired by ancient Chinese poetic commentary and other scholars' translation criteria; the micro-level criterion is the Eight-Beauties Theory -- Beauty of form, musicality, image, emotion, suggestiveness, diction, allusion and others, which are synthesized from Prof.

Xu Yuanchong's theory of Three Beauties, Prof. Gu Zhengkun's poetry appreciation theory, Mr. Lin Yutang's principles of Five Beauties and Peter Newmark's aesthetic viewpoints. Hopefully, it can guide poetry translation practice and its criticism [2].

### The Macro-level: Harmony

To be specific, the macro-level criterion is Harmony (Zhonghe), borrowing from the basic ideas of the Theory of Harmony (Hexie) by Prof. Zheng Hailing. Because of the differences between Chinese and English poetry in the linguistic transformation, cultural communication and other aspects, there are controversies in poetry translation practice and poetry translation criteria regarding its translation strategies and methods. There have been long debates about whether poetry translation is science or art, translatability or untranslatability, literal translation or liberal translation, naturalization or alienation, resemblance in spirit or form, loyalty or creation, etc. In order to translate well, we should adopt the theory of Harmony as the guiding principle.

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

The middle-level criterion is "Resemblance in Style, Sense and Poetic Realm", inspired by ancient Chinese poetic commentaries and other scholars' translation criteria. Resemblance in style refers to the criterion that the style of the translation is similar to that of the original poetry. Resemblance in sense refers to the criterion that the sense of the translation is similar to the original poetry. Resemblance in poetic realm refers to the criterion that the poetic realm of translation is similar to the original poetry. According to the Three-Level poetry translation criteria, the comprehensive effect of artistic conception produced in the reader's mind is similar to that of the original poetry in the original reader's mind.

### The Micro-level: Eight Beauties

The micro-level criteria are the Eight-Beauties – Beauty of form, musicality, image, emotion, suggestiveness, diction, allusion and gestalt. Beauty of form refers to the external form of poetry itself, and it determines whether the number, arrangement, length, indentation and structure of poetry have higher beauty of form; Beauty of musicality refers to the beauty formed by the tone and rhythm of syllables in poetry; Beauty of image refers to the visual beauty formed by the perceptual elements of the vivid imagery or image group in reality or imagination; Beauty of emotion refers to the emotions of the poet through his words or his subjective expression; Beauty of suggestiveness is one of the most remarkable aesthetic characteristics in Chinese poetry. The translator should be aware of the great charm of this beauty and properly reproduce the suggestive beauty of the original poetry; Beauty of

diction requires the translator to respect the hard work of the original author's creation, and keep improving the translation quality, so that the language formed at the micro level is suitable to express the content; Beauty of allusion can make poetry concise, implicit and meaningful. The above seven specific beauties cannot cover all the beauties of different poems, which may include the above-mentioned seven specific beauties, the beauty of number, of the shift of perspectives, etc. As the Gestalt Theory points out, the whole of perceptual experience is more than the sum of its parts [3]. In fact, beauties are not fixed in poetry. The eight beauties are not necessarily the same in translating each poem. In the translation of different poems, some beauties such as beauty of allusion may not exist, other beauties may not be important, and each specific beauty should be given different degree of reappearance according to the characteristics of the original poetry and translation strategies[4].

### Three-Level Criteria of Poetry Translation: Case Studies of Children's Object-Chanting Poetry in Ancient China

Most children's poetry translations are included in the Tang or other dynasties and they are not separated from the poetry of grown-ups. In 2015, Zhou Yongmo edited a book entitled *Fifty Selected Children's Poetry in Ancient China: English Translation and Appreciation*, which is the only book on the English translation of children's poetry in ancient China. The publication of this book has filled a gap in the history of English translation studies of children's poetry in ancient China. Children's poetry is more concerned with chanting objects and narrating events, less with expressing aspiration and reasoning.

### Analysis of the Translations of Children's Object-Chanting Poetry

Object-Chanting poetry is a genre of poetry that sings of and praises objects expressed with the poet's emotions on various objects. Children's poetry is different from adult's poetry in that it usually has unique images and that its objects are more vivid and poetic in some cases. There are sixteen object-chanting poems in *Fifty Selected Children's Poetry in Ancient China: English Translation and Appreciation* and the authors choose two poems as follow:

#### Example 1 《石灰吟》

《石灰吟》

明·于谦（12岁）

千锤万击出深山，烈火焚烧若等闲。  
碎骨粉身浑不怕，要留清白在人间。

Ode to Lime

Yu Qian (12 yrs.) Ming Dynasty

You come from mountain rocks after a myriad of blows.

Burned in the raging fire, you care nothing about throes.  
Being smashed to pieces, you hold not the slightest fear.  
Pure and white, you lend a virtue to the human sphere.

[5]

#### Song of the Lime

Yu Qian (12 yrs.) Ming Dynasty  
You come out of deep mountains after hammer blows;  
Under fire and water tortures you're not in woes.  
Though broken into pieces, you will have no fright;  
You'll purify the world by washing it e'er white.

(Tr. by Xu Yuanchong)

#### Lime

Yu Qian (12 yrs.) Ming Dynasty  
Hacked and hammered a thousand times,  
From the depth of the mountains it comes.  
Through hectic heat and frantic flame,  
Unperturbed it stays the same.  
Flesh and bone to smithereens crushed,  
It still is unafraid, unflushed.  
For all it desires from its birth,  
Is leaving whiteness to this earth

[6]

The Ming Dynasty poet Yu Qian (1398-1457) wrote the poem 《石灰吟》 when he was 12 years old. This poem describes the production process of the lime. The poet implicitly compares himself to the lime and displays the spirit never afraid of sacrifice.

At the macro-level, the criterion is harmony. The translator should negotiate the differences and disharmonies between the two languages and cultures. The six disharmonies should be considered in poetry translation. For example, in the aspect of parataxis and hypotaxis, three translators hold different translation views. There is no personal pronoun in the original poetry, and the poet presents himself as the lime to express the spirit never afraid of sacrifice. In his translation, Wang Zhihuan used a large number of sentences with no subject in accordance with the original poem, showing a tendency of keeping the parataxis in the original poem. Zhou Yongmo and Xu Yuanchong attached importance to hypotaxis, which is a feature of English, and translated the subject of the poem into "You". The two kinds of translators have great differences in poetry translation in that they have given different priority to hypotaxis in English or parataxis in Chinese. In fact, if it has too much emphasis on hypotaxis in English, it may damage the poetry's flavor, while parataxis in Chinese may be unfamiliar to English readers. Only with "harmony" as a macroscopic principle and coordinating the relationship

between parataxis and hypotaxis to consider both the original poetry's flavor and the reader's acceptance can the translation be well appreciated and well accepted.

At the middle-level, the theory is "resemblance in style, sense and poetic realm". First, in the aspect of resemblance in style, Yu Qian uses the skill of symbolic technique to describe the lime and expresses his desire and spirit like the lime. Although Wang Zhihuan's translation is about the lime more than the original poem, however, the lines of the translation are too long, failing to maintain the style of the original poem. Second, regarding resemblance in sense, the term "千锤万击" means "innumerable times of hammering", which shows that it is very difficult to mining and transporting limestone. Xu Yuanchong translated into "hammer blows" and there are no quantifiers about "千" (thousand) or "万" (ten thousand), which is inconsistent with the original poem. Zhou Yongmo, Wang Zhihuan reproduced the correct meaning in spite of the fact that they adopted different words. Zhou Yongmo and Xu Yuanchong translated the title "石灰吟" into "Ode to Lime" and "Song of the lime" in accordance with the original sense. Wang Zhihuan translated into "lime", which is much simpler.

Finally, the discussion of resemblance in poetic realm is mainly based on the translation of the last line "碎骨粉身浑不怕，要留清白在人间". Zhou Yongmo and Wang Zhihuan used the present tense and the present continuous tense to state that the author's emotions stay at the present. While Xu Yuanchong used the future tense, which is a description of the past, reproducing the original poetic realm better.

At the micro-level, the criteria are eight beauties – Beauty of form, musicality, image, emotion, suggestiveness, diction, allusion and gestalt. In the beauty of form, 《石灰吟》 as a seven-character quatrain has the beauty of form. However, the number of syllables contained in a word in English poetry and the number of letters in each syllable is not fixed, and its linguistic form often varies in length. It is inevitable that the beauty of the form must be lost in translating Chinese poetry into English. If the length of each line is roughly equal, the formal beauty of the original poetry will be reproduced in the new language carrier. In the translations of Xu Yuanchong and Zhou Yongmo, its number of syllables in each line and the length of the lines are roughly equal, similar to the original Yu Qian's poem, and the formal beauty of the original poem is reproduced well. The length of the lines in Wang Zhihuan's translation is almost twice as long as other translations and it, to a large extent, failed to reproduce the beauty of form.

As for the beauty of musicality, the end rhyme in the original poem is “-an” and the rhyming scheme is aaxa, translators should reproduce the musical beauty in the target language. Xu Yuanchong and Zhou Yongmo both used the rhyming scheme of “aabb” while Wang Zhihuan used the rhyming scheme of “aabb ccdd” to recreate the musical beauty of the original poem.

In terms of the beauty of image, the most prominent image is “lime” in this poem. Yu Qian implicitly compared himself to the lime, however, Xu Yuanchong and Zhou Yongmo did not directly convey the images of “lime”, the author’s self-representation, but translated “lime” into “You”. However, it’s such a short poem, the readers can easily find that “You” is referring to the “lime” mentioned in the title.

Regarding the beauty of emotion, the original poetry does not have a personal pronoun and the author implicitly compares himself to the lime to express his spirit never afraid of sacrifice. Zhou Yongmo and Xu Yuanchong translated the “lime” into “You” to convey the intimate feelings among readers, which might make the readers more closely, feel the beauty of emotion.

As for the beauty of suggestiveness, take “清白” as an example, it refers to the lime color in white on the surface, but it actually refers to a noble and precious spirit of human. Zhou Yongmo translated it into “virtue” directly, which pointed out the suggested beauty of the original poem. Xu Yuanchong and Wang Zhihuan literally translated it in accordance with the original poetry and reproduced the suggestive beauty of the original poem.

This poem uses simple and clear words, which are relatively easy for translation, thus the beauty of diction and allusion can be negligible. In addition to reproducing the above seven kinds of beauties, we also noticed its gestalt beauty. From the comparison, it is not difficult to find that the translations of Xu Yuanchong and Zhou Yongmo are comparatively better.

## Example 2 《咏蛙》

《咏蛙》  
唐·杨收（13岁）  
兔边分玉树，龙底耀铜仪。  
会当同鼓吹，不复问官私。

On the Toad

Yang Shou (13 yrs.) Tang Dynasty  
Amongst the Jade Trees the Rabbit you captivate<sup>[1]</sup>  
Under dragons with the bronze instrument you glow<sup>[2]</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In Chinese mythology, there lived in the Moon a toad, the Yang spirit of the Moon, and the Jade Rabbit, the Yin spirit of the Moon.

Two bands play music well, and your croaks are as beau<sup>[3]</sup>

None would ask you for the official or private<sup>[4]</sup>  
(Tr. by Wang Feng)

The Tang Dynasty poet Yang Shou wrote the poem 《咏蛙》 when he was 13 years old. This poem describes three different toads in ancient Chinese culture. It is full of allusions and imaginations. There are four allusions about the toad in this short poem. The first allusion is a fairy tale about the toad, which is living in the moon palace with the Jade Rabbit and the cassia tree. The second one is about Zhang Heng’s seismometer. The third one refers to the toad that makes a wonderful song. The last allusion is a joke that the Hui Emperor in the Jin Dynasty (265-420A.D.), who once heard of the croaks and asked whether the toads were croaking for the official or for the private.

At the macro-level, the criterion is harmony. Due to great cultural difference between different cultures, Wang Feng’s translation pays much attention on the reception of target readers and adopts the method of literal translation with annotations to reproduce this poem. At the middle-level, the theory is “resemblance in style, sense and poetic realm”. First, in the aspect of resemblance in style, 《咏蛙》 used simple words to express the poet’s knowledge of the toads. From the English translation, we see that he also used simple words; thus, the style of translated poetry is similar to the original poetry. Second, in the aspect of resemblance in sense, the first line “兔边分玉树” means “the toad lived with the Jade Tree and Rabbit in the moon”, while in Wang Feng’s translation there seems to have an extra verb “captivate”, however, it conveys the hidden sense in the allusion. Why the beautiful rabbit lives with the ugly toad among the Jade Trees? It’s all because the toad captivates it. On the surface, the word “captivate” is added, however, in terms of sense, it shows the hidden meaning. Finally, the discussion of resemblance in poetic realm is mainly based on the translation of the last line “会当同鼓吹”，

<sup>2</sup> In 132 A.D., a Chinese inventor called Zhang Heng invented a seismoscope, which had eight dragons marking the primary directions and in each dragon’s mouth was a small bronze ball. If there was an earthquake, a ball in that direction would be released and fall in the mouth of one of the eight bronze toads beneath.

<sup>3</sup> “Two bands play music well, and your croaks are as beau”, was from Kong Zhigui, a famous writer in the South Dynasty (420-589A.D.).

<sup>4</sup> There was a joke that the Hui Emperor in the Jin Dynasty (265-420A.D.) once heard of the croaks and asked whether the toads were croaking for the official or for the private.

不复问官私”。Wang Feng translated it into a metrical poem and explained the meanings of allusions in details in the annotations. These proper annotations can help readers better understand and appreciate the poetic realm of this poem.

At the micro-level, the criterion is eight beauties – Beauty of form, musicality, image, emotion, suggestiveness, diction, allusion and gestalt. In the beauty of form, 咏蛙》as a five-character quatrain that has a beauty of form. In Wang Feng’s translation, its number of syllables in each line and the length of the lines are roughly equal, and the formal beauty of the original poem is reproduced well. In the beauty of musicality, Wang Feng uses the rhyming scheme of “abba” to recreate the musical beauty. In the beauty of image, Yang Shou described three different toads in ancient Chinese culture. It is unquestionable that the most important image is “toad”. One of the toads live in the moon, another works for Zhang Heng’s seismometer, and still another sings songs together. Wang Feng translated the image of “toad” by full means one by one, and the image beauty of the original “toad” was reproduced well. As for the beauty of emotion and suggestiveness, the original poem did not have the word “toad” and Yang Shou implicitly stated everyone should be treated equally without discrimination. Wang Feng translated the “toad” into “You” to make the subject seem close and can arouse similar emotions among readers. Regarding the beauty of allusion, Yang Shou’s poem is full of allusions. Wang Feng’s translation explained the meaning of allusions in details in the annotations, helping readers better understand and appreciate the allusions of this poem. In addition to reproducing the above beauties, the author also noticed its gestalt beauty. In translating “会当同鼓吹”, he used “Two bands play music well, and your croaks were as beau” to make the difficult original expression much clearer for English readers to understand. Based on the above, Wang Feng’s translation well reproduced the beauties [4].

## CONCLUSION

There exists a gap between children’s poetry in ancient China and English poetry, and this has become a barrier for translating them into English. When translating children’s object-chanting poetry, translators should take “harmony” as the macro-criterion, the theory of “resemblance in style, sense and poetic realm” as the medium-criteria and eight beauties as the micro-criteria. In fact, it should be pointed out that the eight beauties are not necessarily at the same time functioning as the criteria of all poetry translation, and that not all poetry has fixed beauties. Object-chanting poetry aims to sing of and praise objects expressing the poet’s mixed emotions on various objects. Thus, the translator should give prior attention to the beauty of

emotion. It is worth noting that children’s poetry has unique image and its objects are often vivid and poetic. For example, the image “toad” in the second poem is very unique. Therefore, in addition to reproduce the formal beauty and musical beauty of metrical poetry, the beauty of emotion and image should be given priority to in the translation of children’s object-chanting poetry in ancient China.

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