

Original Paper

The “Beauty in Sound” and “Beauty in Form” in English Translation of Zhuang Love Songs from Variation Theory of Comparative Literature

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Abstract

Zhuang people love singing. Their folk songs are diverse in form and rich in content. As one of the dozens of Zhuang folk songs, love songs of Zhuang are diverse, melodic and rich in content. As Zhuang love songs is an important part of Zhuang folk songs, translating the classic works of Zhuang love songs into English is conducive to the dissemination of Zhuang culture, showing the diversity of Chinese national culture and telling Chinese stories well. From the perspective of variation theory of comparative literature, the paper will take the existing English versions of Zhuang love songs as examples, such as Poya Love Songs and Liao Songs of Pingguo Zhuang, and analyze the variation of “beauty in sound” and “beauty in form” in the process of translating Zhuang love songs into English.

Keywords

Beauty in sound, beauty in form, Zhuang love songs, variation theory, English translation

1. An Introduction

1.1 An Introduction to Zhuang Love Songs

As the most populous ethnic group in China, the Zhuang are a people who love to sing and even have several regular folk song gatherings every year, the most distinctive of which is the “March 3” song

festival. In parks and other public places in areas inhabited by Zhuang people, groups of people can be seen everywhere, gathering together to sing folk songs or singing in pairs. The Zhuang people are good at drawing metaphors from things and singing beautiful lyrics in the form of riddles and asking questions. Zhuang folk songs are diverse in form and rich in content. They are one of dozens of Zhuang folk songs, which are rich in types and can be divided into more than 30 kinds according to the arrangement of sentence patterns, such as five-word sentence, seven-word sentence and so on. At the same time, due to different language habits in different regions, they also contain such vivid modal particles as “lie”, “lei”, “luo”, “ei” and “liao”. Zhuang love songs are also melodic and rich in content. Young male and female singers often use metaphors, hints, innuendo and puns to express their inner feelings. They use songs to praise the vegetation, mountains and rivers, describe various flowers, and sing praises to the stars and the moon to express their love for each other (Huang, 1985, p. 80). The Zhuang love songs discussed in this paper mainly include love songs of Liu Sanjie’s ballads, *Poya Love Songs* of Yunnan Funing, *Liao Songs of Pingguo Zhuang* and so on. Liu Sanjie’s love song refers to the love-themed ballads created by Zhuang and Dong ethnic groups and Han people and sung from generation to generation in Yizhou, the core area of Liu Sanjie’s ballad culture, such as “Song of the Single”, “Song of Road Blocking”, “Song of Changing Letters”, “Song of Parting”, “Song of Reunion”, “Song of Bitter Love”, “Song of Goodbye” and so on. *Poya Love Songs* is a classic collection of Zhuang love songs and a treasure of national culture. The book records the romantic process of a pair of young man and woman meeting, knowing each other, falling in love and making a promise of leading a long life together, and in the book, one simple and vivid picture text represents a song, each song is independent, and the man and woman sing in turn. It is the only document that records folk songs in picture writing; As a precious resource of the ethnic cultural heritage of Yunnan Province and one of the living picture characters in China, it is of high research, understanding and development value (Wu & Lu, 2012). It is also a long poem combining narrative and lyric expression, and uses a large number of images to enrich its expression, involving topic about plants, animals, life, natural landscape, behavior and so on. Due to the unique history, national psychology and aesthetic habits of the Zhuang nationality, many images in *Liao Songs of Pingguo Zhuang* have special significance and carry the unique cultural connotation of the Zhuang nation (Li & Wang, 2019, p. 45). Zhuang love songs are an important part of Zhuang culture, and the translation of classic works of Zhuang love songs into English is conducive to the dissemination of Zhuang culture, showing the diversity of Chinese national culture, and telling Chinese stories well. From the aspect of variation theory of comparative literature, this paper will analyze the variation of the “beauty in sound” and “beauty in form” in the translation process of Zhuang love songs.

1.2 Variation Theory and Translation

The variation theory of comparative literature, proposed by Chinese scholar Cao Shunqing under the background of the French School’s “seeking common ground and forgetting differences” and the

American School's "seeking common ground and rejecting differences", emphasizes the process of equal dialogue between literary works of different countries, regions and nations as well as the heterogeneity of literature of different civilizations in the East and the West. Variation theory refers to the study of the variation of the literary phenomena of different countries and civilizations in influencing communication, as well as the variation presented in the mutual interpretation of the literature of different countries and civilizations, and the exploration of the law of variation in comparative literature (Cao, 2006). The variation theory in comparative literature is put forward based on the basic point of difference, and the basic theoretical understanding of variation is that heterogeneity can also be compared. Homology contains variation, because the homologous literature is transmitted from one country to another, and there are variations at the level of language, literary image, literary text and culture (Cao, 2008, p. 35). The greater value of variability lies in seeking the variation produced in the process of spreading literature in different countries, as well as the heterogeneity factors among different civilizations. The variation theory of comparative literature is a discipline that takes transliterality and literariness as the research fulcrum, and probes into the inherent regularity of the difference and variation of literary phenomena by studying the variation of literary communication between different countries and the heterogeneity and variability of literary expression in the same category between literary phenomena that have no factual relationship. Therefore, the translation of ethnic minority literature should focus on the different literary expressions and different cultural manifestations among different ethnic groups, allow the existence of variation in translation, allow the processing of variation in translation, and realize the real spread of ethnic minorities (Guan & Mai, 2020, p. 32). Translation involves not only pure linguistics, but also two different cultures and discourse systems behind two texts or two languages (Cao, 2018, p. 313). These two discourse systems may have some overlap, crossover and corresponding parts, but they can never be completely equivalent. Therefore, translation is a dialogue between different cultures and discourses. In the process of English translation, due to differences in language, culture, time and space, the information conveyed will inevitably change. Compared with the original text, the translated text will show variations not only in language form but also in language content (Wu, 2007, p. 173). The English translation of Zhuang love songs is a kind of cross-cultural transmission. In this process, the differences between the source language and the target language will inevitably lead to some degree of variation. In addition, the cultural differences between the author of the source text and the translator of the target language also aggravate the variation to some extent. In other words, in cross-border translation activities, the difference between the source language and the target language is the objective cause of variation, and the cultural filter generated by the cultural difference between the author and the translator is the subjective cause of variation (Tang, 2020).

2. The Variation of “Sound” and “Form” in the English Translation of Zhuang Love Songs

In the process of translating Zhuang love songs into English, there will be some variation in both “sound” and “form”. Although there are similarities between Zhuang love songs and English poetry, they are never exactly equivalent, so variation is inevitable. In terms of rhythm, Zhuang love songs are very distinctive. The rhythmic beauty of Liu Sanjie’s ballads is reflected in its rhythmic form. Common rhyme forms are AABA style or ABCB style without strict requirements for the first sentence, or ABAB style. Liu Sanjie’s ballad is catchy, and its rhyme can bring great beauty. Also take *Liao Song of Pingguo Zhuang* as an example, most of its sentence patterns are five words, each of which ranges from four sentences or dozens of sentences. The main rhymes include alliteration, waist-foot rhyme and foot rhyme, and the rhythm is strict and harmonious, especially the rolling serial waist rhyme (A/AB/BC/C), during which the four-sentence pattern semi-“strangling rhyme” (A/AB/B/B) is inserted. Take the “Singing Flowers” part of “March Song” in *Liao Song of Pingguo Zhuang* as an example, the structure is as follows:

Example 1

Ciuh gep caen rox caux

A

古时真会造

Ciuh laux caen rox cawq

A

B

老辈真会制

Cawq daengz gyaep lienz liengj

B

C

制笠又制伞

Siengj guh fwen sam nyied

C

想唱三月歌

This kind of waist-foot rhyme is graceful and circular, and has strong musicality. In contrast, in English poetry, there are mainly alliteration, ventral rhyme and end rhyme, among which the end rhyme is the most common, or fixed types of poetry have fixed rhymes, such as ABAB, ABCD, ABBA, AABB and AAAB. For example, Shakespeare’s sonnets are basically divided into the first three four lines and the last two lines with a metrical structure of ABAB, CDCD, EFEF, GG. And the English versions of the above example 1 are:

Ancient people invented things,

Whatever things they had made.

Straw hats and raincoats they’d invent,

With which they’d sing March songs.

(Translated by Zhou Yanxian & Lu Lianzhi)

In old times people created

Old stuff all hand-made

Hats and umbrellas they had made

Lunar March songs together they play (Translated by Chen Bing)

Among the above two English versions, Zhou's translation has a clearer logic, which enables readers to understand the context better, and focuses more on expressing the connotation of the original text, while it ignores the "beauty in sound" of the original text. And Chen's translation tries to reproduce the rhythmic beauty of the original text by rhyming at the end, but it has obvious differences and differences from the interlinked waist and foot rhyme of the original Zhuang text. It can be seen that in the English translation of Zhuang love songs, due to the difference in rhythm between Zhuang love songs and English poetry, it is almost impossible to reproduce the original rhythm, and certain variation in "sound" is inevitable.

Also, take the 23th song "Wild Fruit" in *Poya Love Songs* as an example. All sentences in the book are mainly five words and the original text of "Wild Fruit" is the following:

Example 2

Mag ndingh oq ndingh ruz

山果熟红透

Goz yaek gawn lau fwd

哥想吃怕涩

Goz yaek ud lau haemz

哥想尝怕苦

Sieng gukcaemz goz cik

想亲怕拒绝

Goz yaek gwn lau caz

想咽怕糙喉

Sieng gukbas goz cik

想嫁哥不娶

And the existing English versions of the above song are:

The fruit is ripe, red and beautiful,

I want to taste it, but I'm afraid that it's still tart.

I want to eat some, but I fear it might still be bitter.

I want to kiss you, but I'm afraid you will reject me.

I want to taste some fruit, but I'm afraid it could be rough.

I want to marry you, but I am afraid of being refused.

(Translated by Ma Huaizhong)

Wide fruits become ripe:
 They may be the sour type;
 They may be too bitter
 And too hard to swallow.
 I long to marry you, dear
 But you may refuse, I fear.

(Translated by Zhou Yanxian etc.)

From the targets texts of example 2, it can be seen that when the original text is converted into the target text, the “form” will be changed more or less. In order to fully express the original content, Ma’s version has about ten words or syllables in each line, and a comma is added in the middle to break sentences. Therefore, the length of each line is very different from the five words of each line in the original text, which will affect the musicality of the original text. However, Zhou’s version is similar to the original text and tries to limit the words to five to seven, which can reproduce the simplicity and clarity of the original text. In addition, the last two lines are punctuated with commas, and after the comma is added the word “dear”, a term of endearment calling the other party, which shows that the relationship between the two singers has been very close.

3. The “Beauty in Sound” and “Beauty in Form” in English Translation of Zhuang Love Songs from Variation Theory of Comparative Literature

In English translation, the “beauty in form” of Zhuang love songs can be shown in the number of lines and syllables which should be similar to the original law and which has aesthetic value and brings visual enjoyment to readers. In order to reproduce the “beauty in form” of the original text, it is necessary for the target text to try to be as similar as possible in the length of the translated sentences and the regularity of the antithesis. “Form” also includes the category of subject matter. Zhuang love songs are most similar to English poetry in both content and form, so it is reasonable to compare the standards of English poetry when translating Zhuang love songs into English. The original Zhuang text of example 2 above is in the form of five words or five syllables in each line. The number of lines in Ma’s translation and Zhou’s translation is the same as the original text, but there is a big difference in the number of words per line. The multiple use of “I want to” in the translation reproduces the parallelized sentence pattern of the original repeating word “yaek (meaning ‘want to’)", but the middle of each line is added with a comma to indicate a pause. However, according to the original form, Zhou’s version tries to limit the number of words or syllables in each line to about 5, but there are also some differences from the original text. For example, the second and third lines all start with “they”, which reproduces the parallel sentence pattern of the original text, and the last two lines also have

traces of parallel, both use “I” as the subject of the sentence, but in order to rhyme, the position of “I” is slightly adjusted in the last line, which is a variation in form compared with the original text, and it is reasonable. Another variation is that colon, comma and period are added respectively in the first, second, fourth and sixth lines of the translation, and commas are added respectively in the last two lines, which is different from the original. This difference is quite natural, and it is determined by the grammatical differences between English and Zhuang. Obviously, the number of syllables per line is similar to the original text, and it also rhymes better, which can better reproduce the “beauty in sound” of the original text. However, the “beauty in form” of this reproduction is different from the original text. Because of English grammar rules, punctuation marks must be added between each line in the translation, and because Zhuang is more inclined to be a paratactic language, which does not pay special attention to grammatical forms like English, the original text can break sentences according to the content, without punctuation marks. It can be said that this difference can help to better reproduce the beauty of the original text, which is an indispensable means to transform Zhuang love songs into English poems.

As for “beauty in sound”, the rhyme of poetry is mainly reflected in rhyming, and there are a few special forms of expression such as repeated words and fixed phrases. When translating Zhuang love songs into English, we should consider how to reproduce the original rhyme better. Take the “flower arrangement” part in March Songs from *Liao Songs of Pingguo Zhuang* as an example:

Example 3

Song hoiq euj aeu va

A

我俩折要花

Va doek raemx roengz raiq

A

B

花落水下滩

Mingh hoiq mingh boux maiq

B

我命是寡命

Haiq va dauq daengz ndwi

B

赏花空手回

In this “flower arrangement”, the last word of the first line rhymes with the first word of the second line, which rhymes with the last word of the third line and the first word of the fourth line. This is a semi-“strangle rhyme” inserted in the rolling chain waist-foot rhyme, which has a strong musical character. There are currently two target texts of this love song:

We reach out for the flower

Flower falls into the river
 Being out of luck
 I return home with empty hands
 (Translated by Chen Bing)

We reach out for the flower,
 But they drop into the river.
 Being out of luck,
 We're empty-handed back.
 (Translated by Zhou Yanxian, etc.)

Most of the words in the two versions of the translation are very similar, the form is similar to the original, and each line of lyrics is limited to about five words. Chen's version tries to be closer to the original in form, without any punctuation, while Zhou's translation adds punctuation compliance according to English grammar rules. This is a variation in the beauty of form, which is common in the translation process and is determined by the grammatical rules of English. In terms of rhyme, Zhou translation does a better job. The rhyme is the common AABB style of English poetry, but the first and third lines start with "we", corresponding to the original "hoiq (meaning 'I')", which is closer to the original rhyme. There are similarities and differences between the target text and the original text, both of which reflect the "beauty in sound" through rhyming. However, due to the differences between the two languages, "seeking common ground while reserving differences" is the best choice.

Take the 21st song "Oak Leaves" in *Poya Love Songs* as an example:

Example 4

Mbawhmaex unq ndih ruz
 树叶嫩生生，
 Mbawhhvkw goj fihloenq
 麻栗叶未落，
 Caujbah gvanj aeuh baz
 不忙谈婚嫁，
 Caekngonz raeuz dughndaej
 婚嫁终有时。
 Gaenh mbauqndaej bi'niz
 今年无佳期，
 Goj lixmiz bi'moq
 总还有明年。
 Gaenh bi'moq mboxbaenz

明年如不成，

Gaethoz dai setmingh

断气死非命。

Dai raz setmingh raz

我命贱先死，

Baz fw x lw yienghgaeuq

他人做你妻。

There are currently two English versions:

Nature has seasons for all;

It's too early for oak leaves to fall.

Don't be anxious to get married;

The day will come when we can make it.

If we can't make it this year,

Let's wait for next year.

If we fail again next year,

I would die of anxiety.

But if I died and lost my life,

You'll find someone else for a wife.

(Translated by Zhou Yanxian etc.)

The new leaves on the trees are fresh and tender,

But the teak leaves still have not fallen.

You don't seem in a rush to get a wife.

When will we finally get married?

There is not enough time left this year,

But there is always next year.

If we don't manage to get married next year,

Then I will surely die.

When I am dead and gone,

Another will become your wife.

(Translated by Ma Huaizhong)

In terms of form, both the number of lines and the number of words per line in each translation are very similar to the original text, but the original text is very musical, because almost every line rhymes, and most are alliteration, while Ma's translation has almost no rhyme, Zhou's translation deals well with rhyme, but the difference between the original text and the original text is that the original text is mostly alliteration while Zhou's translation uses the foot rhyme. This difference is to conform to the

language habits of English readers and is a natural choice in the specific context.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, in the English translation of Zhuang love songs, we can achieve “beauty in sound” and “beauty in form” by means of rhyme, controlling the number of syllables and lines. At the same time, the “beauty in sound” and “beauty in form” cannot be one hundred percent identical with the original text, and there will be more or less variation, but this variation is not unacceptable. On the contrary, without variation, it is difficult for Zhuang love songs to spread and be accepted by the outside world. As a result, it is difficult for minority culture to spread worldwide. However, it should be noted that in the process of translating Zhuang love songs into English, we should not pursue “beauty in sound” and “beauty in shape” in an extreme way, and overemphasize rhythm and the reproduction of forms, which will affect the artistic value of the original text and fail to reproduce the “beauty in sense” of the original text. Therefore, “beauty in sound” and “beauty in form” should be realized under the premise of “beauty in sense”.

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