



A Comparative Analysis of Two Chinese Translations of “I Died for Beauty” from the Perspective of the “Three Beauties” Theory

--Taking the Translations of Jiang Feng and Zhou Jianxin as an Example

Qinling Ran*

School of English Studies, Tianjin Foreign Studies University, Tianjin, China

*E-mail:1613687374@qq.com

Abstract. Poetry constitutes an essential component of literary studies and culture communication. Emily Dickinson, as one of the pioneers of American modernist poetry, had written 1755 poems in her lifetime, which are internationally acclaimed. Among her works, the poem “I Died for Beauty” stands out as a prominent example, frequently cited in Chinese textbooks on American literature and its history. This paper employs a famous Chinese translator, Xu Yuanchong’s “Three Beauties” theory to conduct a comparative analysis of two Chinese translations of Dickinson’s “I Died for Beauty” from three aspects: sound, form and meaning. It is expected that this study will elucidate how each translation interprets Dickinson’s themes and stylistic elements, providing a deeper understanding of English-Chinese poetry translation between two culture contexts.

Keywords: Emily Dickinson; Three Beauties Theories; Poetry translation; Zhou Jianxin; Jiang Feng

1 Introduction

The famous 19th-century American poet Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), a pioneer of modernism, is undoubtedly one of the greatest poets in the history of American literature. However, this poetess kept her life introverted and reclusive during her lifetime [3]. It was not until the twentieth century when Harvard University Press published the three-volume *Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* and *Complete Letters of Emily Dickinson* edited by Thomas Johnson that American scholars began large-scale research on Dickinson [11]. In contrast, the study of Emily Dickinson in China started later, but many scholars were enthusiastic and devoted themselves to translating Dickinson's poems. With the popularity of Emily Dickinson's poems in China, there is an upsurge in the translation of Emily Dickinson's poems from English into Chinese. A statistical analysis has concluded 82 Chinese poetry anthologies, published between 1976 and April 2010 across mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, that included

translated versions of Emily Dickinson's poems. Of the 120 Dickinson poems featured in these anthologies, 81 of them (67.5%) used translations by Jiang Feng (1929-2017), one of the devoted translators of Emily Dickinson's poems [11]. Additionally, an analysis of 82 poetry anthologies and 11 translated collections (excluding Yan Sihua's Taiwan version) revealed that the seven most frequently translated Dickinson poems were *Success is counted sweetest, I'm Nobody! Who are you, Wild Nights—Wild Nights, The Soul selects her own Society, I died for Beauty—but was scarce, Because I could not stop for Death, and There is no Frigate like a Book* [11]. Today, Dickinson is a pop culture icon. Apple TV is in its third year of production on its popular television show *Dickinson*, written and produced by Alena Smith and starring Hailee Steinfeld [6], which broaden the popularity of this poet among the world.

Due to Emily Dickinson prominent position and extensive influence within the American literary canon, her poetry not only welcomed by Chinese readers and translators, but also has become an integral component of American literature curricula at numerous Chinese universities. Her works are frequently included in American literature selection and American literature appreciation courses, reflecting their significant role in the study and appreciation of American literary heritage. Therefore, the author conducted the mainstream three textbooks applied in American Literature courses in the Chinese universities, including Tao Jie's *Selected Readings in American Literature* (Third Edition), Li Yixie and Chang Yaixin's *Selected Readings in American Literature*, and Wu Weiren's *American Literature and Selected Readings*, which have all chosen some of Emily Dickinson's poems as selected works for reading and appreciation. In the above three selected reading texts, the most frequently selected poem is *Because I could not stop for death*, which was cited in all of the three textbooks. The following two are the poems *I died for beauty-but was scarce* and *I heard a fly buzz--when I died*, both was applied two times; the last one is the poem *Tell all the Truth but tell it slant* with one application.

The two above statistical analysis both show the popularity of Emily Dickinson's poems among Chinese researchers and readers. Despite the abundance of translations of Emily Dickinson's poetry, their quality varies significantly. Common issues include the loss of rhyme and rhythm, ambiguity in cultural references, and instances of mistranslation, which hinder the accurate expression of the creative beauty of Emily Dickinson's works, leading to reader confusion and impeding cultural communication.

Luckily, among the translators who have contributed to this field, Jiang Feng and Zhou Jianxin stand out as pioneering figures in the translation of Dickinson's work into Chinese. Jiang Feng became the first Chinese publisher of Emily Dickinson's poems with his 1984 publication, *Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson*. This book has been reprinted at least 8 times, with 11 print runs and over 74,320 copies sold, making it the most reprinted and best-selling version. In contrast, no other translations have records of reprints [10]. In 2011, *Selected Poems of Emily Dickinson* translated by Zhou Jianxin was published by South China University of Technology Press, which has achieved good sales and overwhelmingly positive reviews from readers due to their faithful and aesthetic language. Zhou Jianxin has made notable contribution to the study of Dickinson and the translation of Dickinson's poems, and his translation has received

widespread acclaim among translators [1] & [7]. Therefore, this paper chooses the translation versions from Jiang Feng and Zhou Jianxin as the research object.

Due to the popularity of Emily Dickinson's poems in China, poetry translation has served as one of the mediums for culture communication. Based on the "Three Beauties" theory, namely "the beauty of meaning", "the beauty of sound" and "the beauty of form", this paper will use qualitative analysis to compare two Chinese translation versions from Jiang Feng and Zhou Jianxin about the same poem, *I Died for Beauty—But was Scarce*, which is one of Emily Dickinson's most popular poems in China and frequently quoted in the courses and textbooks of American literature. A comprehensive interpretation of the two versions is made to figure out the advantages and shortcomings of the two translation and shed light on the English-Chinese translation of Emily Dickinson's poetry.

2 The Translation Principles of "Three Beauties" Theories

In the second half of the 20th century, Professor Xu Yuanchong proposed the "Three Beauties Theory" based on Lu Xun's concept in *An Outline of Chinese Literature*, which states, "Beauty in meaning touches the heart, beauty in sound pleases the ear, and beauty in form delights the eyes" [5]. From Xu's perspective of view, poetry translation should not only remain faithful to the original text but achieve harmony and beauty in three aspects. The "Three Beauties" consist of three aspects, that are "beauty of meaning", "beauty of sound", and "beauty of form".

"Beauty of meaning" refers to the translation's faithfulness to the ideas, emotions and deep meanings in the original text without any ambiguity or misunderstanding. It is the most notable aspect in the poetry translation to ensure the restoration the core information in the poems, even if compromises can be made in other two aspects. "Beauty of sound" means the translation can achieve a harmonious auditory quality by restoring the rhyme, rhythm, meter and total patterns of the original text, which represents that the musicality and beauty will not be destroyed in the target language. The last factor, "beauty of form" refers to aesthetic structure of the poem, consisting of its length of lines, the number of stanzas, and the use of punctuation, emphasizing the preservation of the original poem's formal characteristics. It represents the integrity of the structure of the poem so that the same artistic and aesthetic effect can be conveyed effectively in the target language. However, the relationship among the three factors is not totally equal, and there is a sequence of priority. The accomplishment of the three beauties means a balanced combination between the content and form, and it is the ideal scenario in poetry translation. As the core of the "Three Beauties" theory, the beauty of meaning is at a top priority. Compromises can be made to guarantee it if the other two cannot be achieved.

3 Analysis of the Two Translations of “I Died for Beauty—But Was Scarce” from the Perspective of “Three Beauties” Theories

Written around 1862, the poem *I died for beauty—but was scarce* is one of Emily Dickinson's most acclaimed poems. The poem is written in the first person, and the narrator is a man who “died for beauty” and is buried next to a man who “died for truth”. They strike up a friendship through conversation. But their conversation does not last long, as the passage of time buries their names on the tombstone. As time erases their identities, the poem reflects on the fleeting nature of human endeavors, whether they are in the pursuit of beauty or truth. The poem contrasts idealism with the harsh reality of death, highlighting that death is much more enduring than the ideals for which people sacrifice their lives. The conversation between the two deceased figures symbolizes a shared sense of truth and beauty, yet it also highlights the inevitable silence that comes with death. Dickinson's portrayal of death is neither dramatic nor fearful but rather quiet and contemplative, suggesting a peaceful resignation to the idea that even noble causes such as beauty and truth are subject to decay and oblivion. This somber meditation on the impermanence of life aligns with many of Dickinson's other works, where death, beauty and the passage of time often serve as central motifs.

In the following section, this paper will undertake a comparative analysis of Jiang Feng's and Zhou Jianxin's translations of Dickinson's poem “I Died for Beauty.” The objective is to explore the distinctive features of each translation and evaluate the extent to which they adhere to Xu Yuanchong's “Three Beauties” theory. The original poem and two translations are as followed.

The Original Poem:

I died for Beauty - but was scarce
 I died for Beauty - but was scarce
 Adjusted in the Tomb
 When One who died for Truth, was lain
 In an adjoining Room -
 He questioned softly “Why I failed”?
 “For Beauty”, I replied -
 “And I - for Truth - Themselves are One -
 “We Bretheren, are”, he said -
 And so, as Kinsmen, met a Night -
 We talked between the Rooms--
 Until the Moss had reached our lips -
 And covered up-- our names—

Jiang Feng's Translation:

Wo wei mei er si, dui feng mu
 (我为美而死，对坟墓)
 Ji hu hai bu shi ying
 (几乎还不适应)
 Yi ge xun zhen li de lie shi

(一个殉真理的烈士)

Jiu cheng le wo de jin lin——

(就成了我的近邻——)

Ta qing sheng wen wo “wei shen me er dao xia”

(他轻声问我“为什么倒下?”)

Wo hui da ta: “wei le mei”——

(我回答他：“为了美”——)

Ta shuo: “wo wei zhen li, zhen he mei——

(他说：“我为真理，真与美——)

Shi yi ti, wo men shi xiong di”

(是一体，我们是兄弟”——)

Jiu zhe yang, xiang qin ren, hei ye xiang feng——

(就这样，像亲人，黑夜相逢——)

Wo men, ge zhe fang jian tan xin——

(我们，隔着房间谈心——)

Zhi dao cang tai zhang shang wo men de zui cun——

(直到苍苔长上我们的嘴唇——)

Fu gai diao, wo men de xing ming——

(覆盖掉，我们的姓名——)[4]

Zhou Jianxin's translation:

Wo wei mei er si——dan cai gang gang

(我为美而死——但才刚刚)

Dui feng mu xi guan

(对坟墓习惯)

Wei zhen li er si de yi wei, jiu bei an zang

(为真理而死的一位，就被安葬)

Zai ge bi fang jian——

(在隔壁房间——)

Ta qing sheng wen wo “wei he er si?”

(他轻声问我“为何而死?”)

“Wei le mei”, wo hui da——

(“为了美”，我回答——)

“Wo——wei le zhen li——ta men tong yi——”

(“我——为了真理——他们同一——)

Wo lia, shi xiong di.” Ta shuo——

(我俩，是兄弟。”他说——)

Yin ci, xiang qin ren, zai ye li xiang jian——

(因此，像亲人，在夜里相见——)

Wo men ge zhe fang jian, hu su zhong qing——

(我们隔着房间，互诉衷情——)

Zhi zhi qing tai man shang cun bian——

(直至青苔漫上唇边——)

Yan mo——wo men de xing ming——

(淹没——我们的姓名——)[9]

3.1 Exploration of the Beauty of Sound in Chinese Translation

The poem primarily utilizes common meter, with the first and third lines of each stanza being iambic tetrameter and the second and fourth lines being iambic trimeter. Dickinson creates a consistent and melodic rhythm through this metrical pattern, with the first and third lines of each stanza being tetrameter and the second and fourth lines being trimeter. The integration of this traditional metrical structure with her distinctive themes and stylistic choices contributes to the unique charm of her poetry.

Moreover, both translators have tried their best to preserve the original poem's thyme scheme. Special attention has been given to ensuring that the second and fourth lines maintain as much rhyme correspondence as possible, reflecting the original's formal structure. For example, in Jiang's translation, “应”, “邻”, “心” and “名” are used; in Zhou's translation, “guan (惯)”, “jian(间)” “qing(情)” “ming(名)” are used to guarantee the second and fourth stanzas end-rhymed, reflecting the musicality of the original poem.

3.2 Exploration of the Beauty of Form in Chinese Translation

In poetry translation, the beauty of form encompasses the structural and visual aspects of the poem, such as stanza arrangement, syntax, symmetry, repetition, and rhyme, aiming to preserve the original poem's aesthetic layout and rhythmic flow in the translated version.

Structurally, both translations, following the original poem, retain the traditional form of Dickinson's poetry of one stanza for every four lines. However, there are some differences between the two translations. Zhou's translation is more faithful to the rhythm and musicality of the original poem. Especially in the treatment of dashes, the translator has not deleted or added any of them, which faithfully shows every break and pause of the original poem, ensuring the original coherence of the poem. On the contrary, Jiang's translation is not as precise as Zhou's in the handling of dashes, because he deletes the first dash in the line “And I--for Truth--Themselves are one” and replaces the second dash with a comma, and retains only the last dash. Although this adjust on the dashes better aligns with the usual pauses in Chinese, it results in a somewhat diminished rhythmic quality compared to the original poem. However, for translators, especially translators of poetry, it is undoubtedly a great challenge to “strive for easy comprehension” and “maintain the original's richness” while taking into account the differences between Chinese and English languages. Therefore, although Jiang's translation fails to fully realize the original poem's sense of rhythm and pause in form, it is still excellent in preserving the original poem's mood and rhyme.

3.3 Exploration of the Beauty of Meaning in Chinese Translation

The concept of “the beauty of meaning” emphasizes that translators, while engaging in the translation of original works, must not only convey the literal meaning of the text but also preserve its aesthetic implication. As noted by Mr. Xu Yuanchong, “If the three beauties cannot be achieved simultaneously, one may first forego sound and shape similarity; however, it is imperative to convey the aesthetic meaning of the original as much as possible” [8]. Therefore, the beauty of meaning is the core among the three elements in poetry translation.

At the level of lexical expression, the two translators are slightly different. The first sentence of the original text, “I died for Beauty”, is translated as “Wo wei mei er si (我为美而死)” by both translators, but the following two sentences, “but was scarce” and “Adjusted in the Tomb”, are translated slightly differently. Jiang's translation is “dui feng mu ji hu hai bus hi ying (对坟墓几乎还不适应)”, while Zhou's translation is “dan cai gang gang dui feng mu xi guan (但才刚刚对坟墓习惯)”. Obviously, Jiang's translation is closer to the original, without changing or adjusting the order of the words, keeping the simplicity of the original poem. But the sequential use of the two negatives “almost” and “not” disrupts the rhythm of the translation to some extent. Conversely, Zhou's translation replaces the word “scarce” with the Chinese character “gang gang(刚刚)”, meaning “just” in English, replacing the negative expression of the original poem with an affirmative one, which is natural and fluent, aligning better with the expression habits of Chinese readers.

In the third and fourth lines, Jiang's translation uses the word “jin lin (近邻)” figuratively expressing the physical proximity between the two, which adds a sense of intimacy between the two persons and ensures the following transition to a conversation between the two more natural and reasonable. However, the translation of the word “one” in the original poem as “lie shi (烈士)”, meaning martyr in English, imbues the translation with strong emotional connotations and value judgments. Although the choice of words is in line with the theme of the poem, it deviates from the original poem's tone of calmness and restraint, which is one of the characteristics of Dickinson's style of expressing strong and profound emotions in a cold and restrained manner. Therefore, Zhou's translation of the poem as “na yi wei (那一位)”, meaning “the one” in English, without any elaboration, not only refers to the one who sacrificed his life for the truth, but also retains the original poem's intent.

In the fifth line, the word “failed” in the original poem is treated differently in the two translations. Jiang's translation directly translates it as “dao xia (倒下)”, which is close to the original poem's wording, but is inevitably jarring in the context already created by the preceding text. Zhou's translation is “wei shen me er si (为什么而死)”, which not only echoes “die for beauty” and “die for truth”, but also creates a sense of repetition and rhythm.

In the seventh sentence, the two translations have their own merits. Jiang's translation, in order to conform to the Chinese expression habit, deletes the dashes used to express pause and emphasis in the original poem, from the original four to leaving the only one, which is concise and clear. Zhou's translation is straightforward without destroying the structure of the original poem, which slightly affects the fluency and

readability, but is more faithful to the rhyme and rhythm of the original poem. Therefore, the Jiang translation is more elegant and the Zhou translation is more faithful in the translation of this line.

In the tenth line, for the translation of “talked” in the original poem, both translators adopt more elegant words to reflect the closer distance between their hearts and the deeper resonance of their emotions. Compared with the plain and concise word “tan xin (谈心)”, the emotion conveyed by “hu su zhong qing (互诉衷情)” is longer and more far-reaching, and presents a sense of interaction between the two, retaining the emotional depth of the original poem.

In the last line, the word “fu gai (覆盖)” in the Jiang translation is close to the original meaning of “covered up”, and is faithful and concise. The word “yan mo (淹没)” in Zhou's translation is more refreshing. Firstly, this word means “submerged” in English, conveying the notion of forgetfulness and disappearance, which echoes the theme of death conveyed in Dickinson's poem. Secondly, “drowning” presents a sense of dynamism. The moss, like a green tide, gradually buries the two bodies with the passage of time, suggesting the inexorable force of nature processes. Thirdly, the state of being “submerged” is usually still and quiet. It is not only the names, but also the narrator's voice, and the world's memories of the two men that have been “submerged”. As the moss grows, the “conversation” between the two figures fades until it disappears, which is a dynamism lingering resonance for the reader.

4 Conclusion

Although most of Emily Dickinson's poems are short poems, their rich imagery, unique rhythms, distinctive styles, hazy and mysterious moods, and profound themes undoubtedly set a certain reading threshold for readers. Moreover, Emily Dickinson has written poems that deal with various aspects of love, nature, death, and immortality, and the presentation of death in the poems of Emily Dickinson makes the readers ponder over the concept of death from various angles [2]. In the poem “I die for beauty”, Dickinson explores the relationship between beauty and death. By envisioning a man who died for beauty and a man who died for truth lying side by side in a grave, he implies that beauty and truth are closely connected. At the same time, with the help of the dialogue between the two figures, she reveals a deep connection between beauty and truth, although the unity of the two is fragile, short-lived, and small before the inevitability of death and the oblivion of time. Therefore, both translators have carefully chosen their words and refined their translations in terms of sound, form and meaning, in an attempt to restore the themes and moods of the poem.

From the perspective of Xu Yuanchong's “Three Beauties” theory, both translations have endeavored to achieved the “beauty of meaning”, “beauty of form” and “beauty of sound” in the translations. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that Zhou's translation stands out for its in-depth investigation of the original text and detailed endnotes to clarify obscure parts of the poems for readers in his translations, offering readers valuable insights. Moreover, his translation is smooth and elegant, with a clear intention. In contrast, Jiang Feng's translation is more fluid and simpler, with faithfulness to the

original style. As mentioned above, Jiang Feng's translation of the poem "I die for beauty" is simple and fluent, while Zhou Jianxin's translation is faithful and refined, and both translators have their own merits and are beneficial for the culture communication. Poetry translation is not a competitive arena, but more like a collaborative art, where better translations are always born from the communication of different translations and complementarity of different interpretations.

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