A Study of the Three Chinese Versions of *When You Are Old*
From the Perspective of “Three Beauties Theory”

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Western poetry is widely accepted for its unique romance, and many famous poets have emerged since then. Yeats is a famous Irish poet; he led the Irish Renaissance movement, who is a romantic poet with patriotic feelings. He wrote numerous works during his lifetime, including *When You Are Old*, which has influenced generations and pushed traditional poetry to modernism. This paper will analyze the three translated versions under the guidance of Xu Yuanchong’s famous “Three Beauties Theory”, in order to explore the application and deficiency of “Three Beauties Theory” in poetry translation and promote the progress of translation studies.

*Keywords: When You Are Old, Three Beauties Theory, translation*

*Xu Yuanchong’s Famous “Three Beauties Theory”*

Translation is to express the same meaning in another language after understanding what others say in one language (Zhuang, 2002, p. 8). That’s not enough for poetry translation, so the “Three Beauties Theory” is born. Xu Yuanchong is a famous translator in China and enjoys a high reputation in the world. “Three Beauties Theory” refers to “beauty in sense”, “beauty in sound”, and “beauty in form” (Xu, 1987, pp. 70-77), which reflects the aesthetic features in poetry translation. The theory of “Three Beauties” indicates that translators should not only pursue the similarity of literal meanings, but also convey the temperament, format, and artistic conception of the original works.

*Analysis of the Original *When You Are Old*

*When You Are Old* is an 1893 poem written by William Butler Yeats. It is Yeats’s romantic poem to his lifelong love, Maude Gun. The language of the poem is simple but sincere. The poem uses a variety of literary expression techniques to show the poet’s feelings vividly, but also reveals the contradiction between love and reality. The original poem runs as follows:

When You Are Old

When you are old and grey and full of sleep,
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,
And slowly read, and dream of the soft look
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;

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How many loved your moments of glad grace,
And loved your beauty with love false or true,
But one man loved the pilgrim Soul in you,
And loved the sorrows of your changing face;

And bending down beside the glowing bars,
Murmur, a little sadly, how Love fled,
And paced upon the mountains overhead,
And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.

The language of the whole poem is easy to understand, the words are accurate and concise, and it shows the true feelings and makes people move. The poet Yeats was in the prime of his life when he met the beautiful actress Maud Donne. This poem is an eloquent expression of Yeats’s unswerving loyalty throughout his life. The first stanza describes an elderly heroine reading by the fire in the author’s imagination, the second expresses the author’s strong feelings, and in the third the author imagines a future in which he hopes that his loved one will respond to his feelings.

In terms of format, the poem has three stanzas of four lines each, with each line being approximately equal in length. The number of words per line is 7 to 10. The use of conjunction words at the beginning of the verses ensures unity of form. There are also couplets in the poem which show the beauty of symmetry. The poet uses simple words, but the form of the words is very similar, for example, “sleep” and “deep”, “book” and “look”, so that the reader does not feel cluttered, but rather organized.

The poem shows the “beauty in sound”. The poem is mainly based on iambic pentameter. The word “And” appears several times at the beginning of the sentence to balance the rhythm of the reading. At the end of each line, the words are rhymed, which preserves the form and highlights the beauty of the rhythm. Its rhyme format is “abba, abba, abba”; for example, in the first stanza, “sleep” and “deep” are /i:/ rhymed, “book” and “look” are /ɒk/ rhymed.

Image is the life and soul of poetry, which contains profound cultural connotation and conveys the author’s strong thoughts and feelings (Zhang & Yan, 2020, pp. 60-63). There are many images in this poem, and the poet’s description of the scene is very delicate. Sentiment and scene influence each other and they blend to produce an extreme scenario (Bao & Yang, 2010, pp. 34-38). The artistic conception of the poem is beautiful and romantic, which makes people daydream. The poet imagines a young girl in her twilight years, gray-haired and wrinkled up her cheeks, sitting by the fire. No matter how old she is, now or in the future, the poet’s true feelings towards heroine will not change.

A Comparative Study of the Three Versions of When You Are Old

The poem is so popular that many translations have been made. By careful comparison, we have chosen translated versions by three translators of great renown and of different gender and geographical origin. The first is Fu Hao’s version, the second is Bing Xin’s version, and the third is Yang Mu’s version. We use the “Three Beauties Theory” as a guide to compare and analyze the three versions in order to discover the strengths and weaknesses. The analysis is as follows.

Fu Hao’s Version

当你年老，鬓斑，睡意昏沉，
在炉旁打盹时，取下这本书，
Structurally, Fu Hao’s version is similar to the original. It has three stanzas, each of four lines, and a similar number of words. The form of the poem is neat and tidy, which is in keeping with the “beauty in form”. However, the version does not begin with the repeated word “And” as in the original, which is somewhat lacking.

From the perspective of “beauty in sound”, the poem is in rhyme as a whole. The form of “abba” is generally followed, except for the first stanza, in which “book” and “eyes” do not rhyme.

The plainness of the original lines is in fact due to the understatement of English language, whereas Chinese is overstated. The word “grey” in the original refers to color, but “鬓斑” in the translated version, which vividly illustrates the appearance of old age. The translation of “glad grace” as “风韵妩媚” adds to the personal feature.

Bing Xin’s Version

当你老了, 头发花白, 睡意沉沉,
倦坐在炉边, 取下这本书来,
慢慢读着, 追梦当年的眼神
那柔美的神采与深幽的晕影。
多少人爱过你青春的片影,
爱过你的美貌, 以虚伪或是真情,
惟独一人爱你那朝圣者的心,
爱你哀戚的脸上岁月的留痕。
在炉栅边, 你弯下了腰,
低语着, 带着浅浅的伤感,
爱情是怎样逝去, 又怎样步上群山,
怎样在繁星之间藏住了脸。

Obviously, this version has a different number of words per line and is not very beautiful in form. Moreover, the poem has no rhyme and is not very readable.

Based on “beauty in sense”, this version goes beyond the literal meaning, which is also because Bing Xin is a writer, so creativity is more than faithfulness. For example, “moments of glad grace” is not properly translated as “青春的片影”, because “grace” means “elegance” and does not mean “youth”. “岁月的留痕” is implicitly stated that the person has aged, and the translator is very imaginative in not directly writing “wrinkles” here. In the last two lines, “怎样” appears three times. It dramatizes the poet’s repeated questioning of love and brings the emotion to a climax. The translator adds her own imagery, deepening the emotion of the original poem. In this way, the beauty of the original poem’s mood becomes even more romantic. As a result, this
version does not have “beauty in sound or form”. However, in terms of “beauty in sense”, the translator has a
unique innovation; it gives the reader another style of poetry, another scope for imagination.

Yang Mu’s Version

当你老了，灰黶，沉沉欲眠，
在火炉边瞌睡，取下这本书，
慢慢读，梦回你眼睛曾经
有过的柔光，以及那深深波影;
多少人恋爱你喜悦雍容的时刻，
恋爱你的美以真以假的爱情，
有一个人爱你朝山的灵魂内心，
爱你变化的面容有那些怔忡错愕。

并且俯身闪烁发光的铁栏杆边，
嚅嗫，带些许忧伤，爱如何竟已，
逸去了并且在头顶的高山踱蹀，
复将他的脸藏在一群星星中间。

Yang Mu’s version is less aesthetically pleasing in form than Fu Hao’s, because of the different number of
words. However, in terms of “beauty in sound”, he has managed to rhyme. For example, “经” and “影” are īng rhymed in the first stanza, “刻” and “愕” are è rhymed in the second stanza, and “边” and “间” are īan rhymed in the last stanza.

From the perspective of “beauty in sense”, a lot of high-level words are used to convey the emotion in the
original work, for example, “灰黶”, “雍容”, “嚅嗫”, “踱蹀”, “逸去”, which made the whole poetic language
more formal. Although this is different from the simple vocabulary of the original poem, it gives this version a
classical beauty. Readers can feel the charm of oriental language and the sincerity of western emotion.
Therefore, the language of this version is elegant and retro. This is related to the experience of Yang Mu, the
translator. He has been fond of poetry since he was a child. He is proficient in western culture and loves
classical Chinese poetry.

Conclusion

Whether in the East or in the West, traditional translation theory has always highlighted the importance of
“信”, which is regarded as the most essential translation principle (Tan & Cai, 2005, p. 11). Based on the theory
of “Three Beauties”, overall Fu Hao’s version is the best. But we can see that each of the three versions has its
advantages and disadvantages. Fu Hao’s version is faithful and unimaginative, while Bing Xin’s version lacks
the “beauty in sound” and “beauty in form”, and Yang Mu’s version is slightly more esoteric. It is due to the
different backgrounds of the translators. But we can learn from them the faithful beauty, the imaginative beauty,
and the linguistic beauty. Poetry appreciation will never cease, the use of the “Three Beauties Theory” will
become more widespread, and poetry translation will move on to a better future.

References

