

A Comparative Study of Chinese Translations of Tagore's *Stray Birds* From the Perspective of the "Three Beauties Theory"

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For more than 60 years, Mr. Xu Yuanchong has been devoted to education. He has not only made remarkable achievements in translating from and into Chinese, English, French and other languages, but has also developed his own unique concept of translation. Since 1950, he has always adhered to the "Three Beauties Theory", believing that translation should not only rely on the original text, but also realize the "beauty of meaning", "beauty of sound", and "beauty of form". Based on Xu Yuanchong's "Three Beauties Theory", this paper takes Zheng Zhenduo's and Feng Tang's Chinese translations of *Stray Birds* as an example to explore in depth the specifics of poetry translation theory. The study summarizes the similarities and differences between these two translations in embodying the "three beauties", providing insights into the Chinese translation techniques of philosophical prose poems. This endeavor seeks to offer valuable insights for the comparative study of *Stray Birds* translations

Keywords: "Three Beauties Theory", *Stray Birds*, translation of Zheng Zhenduo, translation of Feng Tang

Introduction: Rabindranath Tagore and *Stray Birds*

Brief Introduction of Tagore and *Stray Birds*

Indian poet Tagore was the first Asian to win the Nobel Prize in Literature. His works reflect a pursuit of freedom, equality, and anti-feudal ideas, which have had a profound influence and occupy an important position in the development of modern Chinese literature (Giri, 2020). *Stray Birds* is one of Tagore's poetry collections, partly translated by himself from his Bengali collection *The Broken Ties* (1899), and another part consists of impromptu English poems during his visit to Japan in 1916, influenced by the concise style of Japanese haiku. In 1922, Zheng Zhenduo's Chinese translation *Stray Birds* was first published, becoming the most well-known version in China. In 2015, Feng Tang's translation sparked controversy due to its use of vulgar language, leading to its recall. The two different translations of the same work received markedly different social feedback.

The reasons behind this discrepancy lie firstly in the differing views of the two translators on poetry translation, secondly in their varying pursuits of poetic rhythm, and thirdly in their adoption of translation techniques. This paper, from the perspective of the "Three Beauties Theory", compares and analyzes the performance techniques of Zheng Zhenduo and Feng Tang's translations from the aspects of semantic beauty, phonetic beauty, and formal beauty, explores the reasons for the differences, and summarizes the techniques of translating prose poetry into Chinese.

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Appreciation of *Stray Birds*

Stray Birds by Rabindranath Tagore is a poetic masterpiece. It provides a glimpse into the intricacies of life, nature, and the human soul. Tagore's poetic prowess shines through the brevity of each verse, often just a line or two, yet containing a universe of meaning. The simplicity of language belies the depth of insight, inviting readers to contemplate the universal truths.

The poems exhibit a keen awareness of the interconnectedness between humanity and the natural world, reflecting Tagore's belief in the harmony between man and his environment. *Stray Birds* also reflects Tagore's admiration for Japanese haiku, evident in the concise and contemplative nature of the verses. The poems touch upon themes of self-discovery, the transient nature of life, and the pursuit of higher truths.

In essence, *Stray Birds* stands as a testament to Tagore's ability to distill profound ideas into poetic gems. Its enduring appeal lies in its universality, inviting readers to embark on a contemplative journey, where each verse becomes a stepping stone towards a deeper understanding of life's complexities.

Introduction to the Translators and Their Translations

Zheng Zhenduo and His Translations

Zheng Zhenduo (1898-1958) was a renowned Chinese modern literary figure, translator, and literary critic. His translations, particularly of Indian literature, introduced new thoughts and artistic styles to the Chinese literary scene.

One of the most outstanding achievements in Zheng Zhenduo's translation career was his rendition of Rabindranath Tagore's *Stray Birds*. In December 1920, he completed a thesis titled "Tagore's Artistic Views", undoubtedly aiding him in gaining a more profound understanding of Tagore's personal characteristics, philosophical perspectives, and the distinctive features of his works. This laid the groundwork for later, more apt translations of Tagore's poetry (Yang, 2015, p. 40).

Zheng Zhenduo's Chinese translation of *Stray Birds* is precise and poetic, successfully conveying the depth of meaning and emotions embedded in Tagore's poetry. Through skillful language use, he preserved the profound thoughts and emotional layers of the original work, causing a sensation in the Chinese literary world and laying a solid foundation for Tagore's literary influence in China. Through his translation of Tagore's works, Zheng Zhenduo successfully brought the literary treasures of Indian literature to China, establishing a bridge for cultural exchange between China and the world.

Feng Tang and His Translations

Born in 1970, Feng Tang is a contemporary Chinese writer, translator, and critic, recognized for his distinctive literary style and contributions to modern poetry. He brought new life to this classic work through his unique approach to translation. Breaking away from tradition, Feng Tang's translation employed vivid, contemporary language that accentuated the emotional expressions within the poetry. Some criticized his liberal adaptations of the original work, especially his use of coarse language, while others praised his innovation, deeming this modern translation more fitting for contemporary readers. The language in his works may impart a sense of unfamiliarity to readers, often veering into nauseating vulgarity to a certain extent due to a lack of control over the "degree" (Jin, 2013, p. 62).

Feng Tang's translation highlighted a focus on the emotional layers of Tagore's poetry, emphasizing resonance with modern readers and creating a sharp contrast with traditional versions. His translation

redefined the standards of traditional literary translation, marking a significant endeavor in the contemporary field of literary translation. Despite ongoing controversies, Feng Tang's translation undeniably injected new vitality into Tagore's literary legacy, while also fueling deep discussions on the art of translation and literary aesthetics.

Hsü Yuan-chung and His "Three Beauties Theory"

Hsü Yuan-chung, born in 1931, stands as a prominent figure in contemporary Chinese translation, celebrated for both his remarkable translation accomplishments and contributions to literary theory. Through extensive translation practice, Hsü Yuan-chung developed and advocated for a distinctive translation theory known as the "Three Beauties" (Xu, 1984, p. 52). The Three Beauties Theory is a framework formulated by Hsü Yuan-chung over years of translation practice. It emphasizes the pursuit of the "beauty of meaning", the "beauty of sound", and the "beauty of form" in the process of translation.

Firstly, the "beauty of meaning" underscores the importance of accurately conveying the original work's connotations and profound meanings. Secondly, the "beauty of sound" emphasizes the rhythm, phonetics, and intonation of the original work during translation. Lastly, the "beauty of form" highlights the importance of respecting the literary form of the original, including sentence structures and rhetorical devices.

This theory has found extensive application in Hsü Yuan-chung's translation practice, allowing his works to maintain accuracy while possessing literary artistic qualities. Notably, the Three Beauties Theory played a crucial role in guiding his translation of the poetry collection *Stray Birds* by the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore. In pursuing the "beauty of meaning", he deeply understood the philosophical connotations and literary emotions in Tagore's poetry, accurately expressing Tagore's unique literary spirit. In terms of the "beauty of sound", Hsü Yuan-chung adeptly utilized the phonetics and rhythm of the Chinese language, maintaining the poetic beauty present in the original. Concerning the "beauty of form", Hsü Yuan-chung preserved the literary form of the original, respecting Tagore's unique sentence structures and rhetorical style.

In conclusion, Hsü Yuan-chung's Three Beauties Theory significantly guided the translation of *Stray Birds*. This success not only demonstrates the practical effectiveness of the Three Beauties Theory, but also provides valuable experience and insights for subsequent translation practices.

A Comparative Study of the Two Translations Under Hsü Yuan-chung's "Three Beauties Theory"

Beauty in Sense

Prose poetry differs from traditional poetry, because it often employs methods of argumentation and description. In comparison to poetry, prose poetry lacks external constraints like syllables, rhythm, rhyme, line count, and arrangement. Simultaneously, prose poetry takes on the appearance of prose while liberating itself from certain formal constraints of poetry, yet retaining the essence of poetry. In the context of translating prose poetry, the utmost importance lies in preserving the "Three Beauties", with a particular emphasis on the beauty of meaning, as it stands as the paramount element. The Three Beauties Theory is hierarchical. Mr. Xu believes that the primary focus should be on conveying aesthetic essence, followed by attention to phonetic beauty, and finally, the consideration of formal beauty. The ideal is to achieve harmony among all three (Xu, 1987, p. 70). The highest realm is the simultaneous presence of all three beauties; if it's challenging to balance, decisions must be made from a holistic perspective (Xu, 2006, p. 9).

Example 1:

The world puts off its mask of vastness to its lover.

It becomes small as one song, as one kiss of the eternal.

Zheng's translation: 世界对着它的爱人，把它浩瀚的面具揭下了。

它变小了，小如一首歌，小如一回永恒的接吻。

Feng's translation: 大千世界在情人面前解开裤裆

绵长如舌吻

纤细如诗行

In the translation of the third poem, Feng Tang rendered “mask of vastness” as “裤裆”, a term that carries a crude and controversial connotation, making it one of the most disputed aspects of Feng's translations. His approach seems more like creative reinterpretation, but this kind of adaptation overlooks the poetic essence of the original work. Choosing the term “裤裆” introduces a vulgar element to the translated poem, understandably prompting criticism for what some perceive as disrespectful to Tagore. In contrast, Zheng Zhenduo's version follows his consistent style of literal translation. He made a slight adjustment in converting the noun “vastness” into an adjective, using simple language to restore the content and emotions of the original poem. Comparing Zheng Zhenduo's and Feng Tang's representations of aesthetic beauty, we can see that the choice of words is the key in poetry translation. The era and personal style of the translator significantly influence their subjective interpretation, leading to differences in the wording of translated poetry. Correctly grasping and appropriately transforming the imagery of the original poem is crucial in determining whether the translated text can capture the aesthetic beauty of the source. Zheng Zhenduo leans towards literal translation, generally succeeding in conveying the aesthetic beauty of the original poem. However, occasional Eurocentric choices may distance the imagery from the acceptance of the target language readers. Moreover, influenced by the era, his translations sometimes bear a semblance of classical language. Feng Tang excels in utilizing familiar imagery for the target language readers, capturing the cultural aesthetics. However, his tendency towards excessive interpretation and creative liberty, bordering on “tampering”, somewhat sacrifices the aesthetic beauty of the translated poetry. Chinese is a language rich in imagery, and poetry serves as an expression of imagery thinking. Hence, when faced with the challenge of balancing accurate expression and appropriate wording, a translator should prioritize the latter. Otherwise, an excessive focus on the minutiae of the original poem's meaning might lead to the loss of the overall imagery of the original, hindering the reproduction of its aesthetic beauty.

Beauty in Sound

Poetry is akin to a rhythmic, melodic, and emotionally vibrant form of language art, with its core lying in its musicality. As early as 1922, Guo Moruo pointed out, “The technique of translating poetry is not merely replacing words from a dictionary, not akin to a telegraph operator translating telegrams for others. The life of poetry resides in the musical spirit within its content” (Chen, 1992, p. 28). *Stray Birds* is a collection of prose poems, unburdened by traditional poetic constraints, adopting characteristics of Old English in its form, with minimal use of traditional English meter and rhyme. However, translators can leverage the uniqueness of the Chinese language, such as bisyllabic words, parallel rhymes, four-character lines, reduplication, radicals, and various structural elements.

Example 2:

This is a dream in which things are all loose and they oppress. I shall find them gathered in thee when I awake and shall be free.

Zheng's translation: 在梦中，一切事都散漫着，都压着我，但这不过是一个梦呀。

当我醒来时，我便将觉得这些事都已聚集在你那里，我也便将自由了。

Feng's translation: 梦里

所有事物松软

所有事物侵染

醒来

所有事物聚集于你

于是我自由天地

Stray Birds takes the form of a prose poem, stripped of the rhyme and meter of Bengali, and emulates the characteristics of Old English in its form, such as the use of archaic words like “thee”, “thy”, “thine”, and “thou”. In the 152nd poem, with “loose” and “oppress” rhyming with “/s/”, and “thee” and “free” rhyming with “/i:/”, following an AABB rhyme scheme, though not strictly adhering to the traditional iambic meter of English, readers can still sense a rhythmic flow, evoking resonance. In his translation, Feng Tang skillfully chose “软” (soft) and “染” (stain) to rhyme with “an”, corresponding to the rhyming of “loose” and “oppress” with “/s/”, while using “你” (you) and “地” (earth) to rhyme with “i”, corresponding to the rhyming of “thee” and “free” with “/i:/”, cleverly preserving the musical beauty of the original poem. In comparison, Zheng Zhenduo's translation focuses more on maintaining the layout and sentence structure of the original poem, presenting a more concise but slightly lengthy content, leaning towards a style closer to prose.

In his translations, Zheng Zhenduo predominantly adopts a literal approach, focusing on conveying the poetic essence and sparingly using unique Chinese rhetorical devices. Conversely, Feng Tang endeavors to preserve the original poem's musicality, employing various methods to embellish, occasionally achieving a transcendent effect. However, an excessive pursuit of rhyme can come off as somewhat forced. In summary, when utilizing the Chinese language, translators should artfully employ structure and rhetoric, not overly emphasizing rhyme and symmetry, ensuring the translation is concise and accessible while retaining the poetic beauty. Excessive pursuit of rhyme and rhythm might make the translation obscure, detracting from the primary aesthetic essence.

Beauty in Form

Stray Birds is a concise yet profound collection of poems, with most verses consisting of just one or two lines, and the longest not exceeding four lines. Despite their brevity, these poems carry rich layers of meaning. To better convey the aesthetic beauty of these brief verses, a translator can leverage the characteristics of prose poetry or free verse, allowing flexibility in word count, division, rhythm, and rhyme. This approach not only reproduces the original poems, but also enhances the overall artistic beauty of the translated poetry.

Example 3:

Kicks only raise dust and not crops from the earth.

Zheng's translation: 踢足只能让地上扬起灰尘而不能得到收获。

Feng's translation: 踢

只能扬尘

不能收获

Zheng Zhenduo and Feng Tang both translated “crops” as “收获” (“harvest”) rather than specifying “谷物” (“grains”). This cleverly conveys the profound philosophy of life in the original poem, maintaining an abstract

sense of beauty. Both translators opted for concise four-character words, making the translations smoother and more flavorful. Zheng's translation tends to follow the original structure, sometimes resulting in verbosity that may not align well with Chinese readers' reading habits, affecting the poetic experience. Feng, on the other hand, introduces subjective interpretations, modifying the poem to arrange the imagery and language rhythm according to the poet's inner emotional fluctuations. Feng uses a free rhythm and rich layers to bring the poem to a climax, which is closer to readers' reading habits.

Conclusion

Due to the cultural and linguistic differences between Chinese and English, achieving the three beauties in the translation of *Stray Birds* poses a significant challenge. While both Zheng Zhenduo and Feng Tang's translations exhibit minor flaws, they overall succeed in capturing the beauty of the original work in terms of imagery, musicality, and form. Zheng's translation tends to adhere closely to the original structure, occasionally resulting in verbosity that might not align well with the reading habits of Chinese audiences, affecting the poetic experience. Utilizing concise four-character words and employing techniques like expanding lines and enriching layers, Feng elevates the expression of the poem to a climax, making it more in tune with readers' preferences. These distinct translation styles underscore the impact of translators' philosophies and experiences on the differences in the translated works, emphasizing the importance for translators to skillfully apply language based on cultural context while striving for the three beauties in conveying the original work's beauty.

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