

A Study on the Subtitle Translation of the “Empresses in the Palace” from Translation and Aesthetics

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Article Detail:	Abstract
<p>Received: 27 Jun 2024; Received in revised form: 24 Jul 2024; Accepted: 03 Aug 2024; Available online: 11 Aug 2024</p> <p>©2024 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).</p> <p>Keywords— Translation and Aesthetics, Subtitle Translation, Episode</p> <p>关键词— 翻译美学 字幕翻译 插曲</p>	<p>The “Empresses in the Palace,” a widely acclaimed Qing Dynasty drama, has won viewer’s love at home and abroad for its complex plot, rich characters, and profound cultural connotations. Its episodes “Buddhist Dancers” and “Ode to the Goddess of Luo” have long been famous for their unique style of lyrics and artistic achievements, coupled with a charm of the tune and melody, jumped into the public vision, almost familiar. From the perspective of translation and aesthetics, this paper probes into the aesthetic representation of episodes from both formal and non-formal systems. It aims to improve the quality of translation and enhance the appreciation of works.</p> <p>甄嬛传》是一部广受赞誉的清代古装宫廷剧，以其复杂的情节、丰富的人物形象和深刻的文化内涵赢得了海内外观众的喜爱。其插曲《菩萨蛮》和《洛神赋》早已以其独特的词赋风格和艺术成就闻名遐迩，加之韵味浓厚的曲调和旋律相配，一跃而进入大众视野，几近耳熟能详。本文在翻译美学的视角下，从形式系统和非形式系统探讨甄嬛传插曲的审美再现问题。旨在提升翻译质量，提高作品的观赏性。</p>

I. INTRODUCTION

The *Chinese dictionary* defined “episode” as short music interspersed in film, drama, and other artistic

styles. In Chinese film and television works, they can be popular songs or be composed for “poems,” “Ci,” and “Fu,” (“Ci” and “Fu” are literary forms) and

then chanted. Different types of films have various standards and effects in selecting episodes. Film episodes are an important carrier of emotional expression. Su Enhua (2006) pointed out that music is a part of a film, helped the film highlight the overall atmosphere, and promoted and regulated the plot. "The Ode to the Goddess of Luo" was an interlude in Zhen Huan's dance for the emperor, which reflected the graceful dance of Zhen and the deep love between Zhen and the emperor. "Buddhist Dancers" appeared in the scene of Zhen Huan crying after Shen Meizhuang (Zhen Huan's best friend) was shocked and died in childbirth. It set off the sad atmosphere and reflected the great affection. These two episodes enriched the character images and the content of the film, enhanced the ornamental and artistry of the work, and added color to the work.

As a literary genre, "Ci" has strict rules on the number of words, sentence patterns, and tonal tones. "Buddhist Dancers" appeared as a song in the Tang Dynasty and later developed into the name of a standard tune of "Ci." It was composed by the poet, the system was relatively short, and the words were concise. It used tones to express emotions. There were many works with "Buddhist Dancers" as the name of the "Ci," and Wen Tingyun's composition was one of them. The length of "Fu" is longer, which pay attention to the literary style and rhyme. The sentences are mainly four or six characters and often use parallelism. "Ode to the Goddess of Luo" was a "Fu" composed by Cao Zhi (a writer of in The Three Kingdoms Period). It had a very high position in the history of "Fu." The film chose the second paragraph as an episode, whose original text mainly described the beauty of "Luo." Many translator like Gong Jinghao, Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang (Yang's wife), have translated "Buddhist Dancers" into English. However, they used different translation strategies

and methods. Most ontological studies on "Ode to the Goddess of Luo" focused on its aesthetic thoughts, images, and meanings. Its translations come from language service organizations and provide English materials for English learners.

II. THEORY BASIS

In the *Dictionary of Translation Studies*, Fang Mengzhi defined translation aesthetics as revealing the aesthetic origin of translation studies, exploring the special significance of aesthetics to translation studies, understanding the scientificity and artistry of translation from an aesthetic point of view, and using the basic principles of aesthetics to propose aesthetic standards for translating different texts to analyze, interpret and solve aesthetic problems in interlingual conversion. Liu Miqing (1986) put forward the conception of translation and aesthetics, including the category and task of translation aesthetics, the aesthetic topic of translation, the aesthetic subject of translation, and the general rule of aesthetic experience in translation. In 2005, in his book *An Introduction to Translation and Aesthetics (2nd Edition)*, he sorted out the origin of Chinese aesthetics and elaborated on translation aesthetics in detail. Translation object language aesthetics included the formal system and non-formal system. The aesthetic composition of formal system is external composition, which are corporeal, perceptual and can promote intuitive thinking by intuition and manifest in pronunciation, vocabulary, words, and sentences. However, the aesthetic composition of the non-formal system is non-material, non-natural, and non-external components that can not be inferred by intuition, expressing in emotion and aspiration, meaning and image. "Ci" and "Fu," as pivotal forms of Chinese classical literature, have unique features in their language expressions, including rhyme and

antithesis. In translation, the translator needs to maintain the rhythm of the original text while considering the expression of the target language, so that it can convey the artistic conception and emotion of the original poem as much as possible.

Using "translation aesthetics" as the keyword, the author searched CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure). The result shows that there are 790 articles in academic journals, which have been on the rise since 2005. The distribution topics mainly focus on "translation aesthetics," "aesthetic perspective," and "aesthetic representation." In terms of content, the distribution concentrated on the analysis of translation aesthetics, the specific application of different genres of translation, the discussion of translation strategies, and the comparative study of the theoretical teaching of translation. As for the number of articles, Chinese scholars have done less research on translation aesthetics than other theories. With "translation aesthetics" and "poetry" as keywords, there are only 50 academic journal papers, but with "translation aesthetics" and "song" as keywords, the results show that there are 10 academic journal papers and 12 master's theses. There are two main problems in related research. First, researchers focused on the content (character lines) and ignored the episode. Second, "translation aesthetics" with poetry and other literary styles is highly professional, and few people study film and TV drama episodes from the perspective of "translation aesthetics."

The "Empresses in the Palace" told the story of Zhen Huan, the heroine who entered the imperial palace and became the empress dowager after all kinds of hardships. It focused on the love and hatred between her and the emperor and Prince Guo, as well as the secret battles with various palace concubines. Scholars focus on the research of film

content and subtitles but neglect the episodes. The "episode" created a specific emotional atmosphere for the viewers through the melody so that they could experience the emotional state of the characters in the film. The explosion of "Empresses in the Palace" shows the power of Chinese films, and the interludes play a role in promoting the storyline. The translation should help the viewers immerse in the context and experience the emotion and artistic conception to achieve a better communication effect. Translation and aesthetics requires the translator to convey the original text's meaning and to maintain its artistry and style so that the translation has similar effects in the target language. Therefore, the English translation of lyrics under the guidance of translation and aesthetics can improve the quality of films and inherit and reproduce the emotion and artistic conception of the works.

III. ANALYSIS

In the "Empresses in the Palace," Wen Tingyun's "Buddhist Dancers" and Cao Zhi's "Ode to the Goddess of Luo" portrayed characters and plots. "Ci" and "Fu" are two different styles in ancient China. "Ci" is relatively short in length, and pays attention to the antithesis. The "Fu" is a long piece, and it focuses on literary talent and rhythm. In the process of translation, the translator should take into account the sound and artistic conception of the original song. It is also necessary to consider the matching degree of the lyrics and the plot to ensure that the translation can match the atmosphere and emotion of the film so that the viewers can understand and experience the plot more deeply. The author discusses the aesthetic representation of the two episodes of "Empresses in the Palace" from the perspective of formal and non-formal systems.

Example 1: The Goddess of the Luo

ST:

翩若惊鸿，婉若游龙。
荣曜秋菊，华茂春松。
仿佛兮若轻云之蔽月，
飘摇兮若流风之回雪。
远而望之，
皎若太阳升朝霞；

TT1:

Dance lightly like a startled wild goose,
Move gracefully like a soaring dragon.
More glorious than the chrysanthemums of
autumn,
More majestic than the pines of spring.
Just like the moon mantled in light clouds,
Swinging like a snowflake swirling in the
blowing breeze.
Gazing from a distance,
As bright as the sun rising above the rosy clouds
of dawn.

(Subtitle Translation)

TT2¹:

Her body soars lightly like a startled swan,
Gracefully, like a dragon in flight.
In splendor brighter than the autumn
chrysanthemum,
In bloom more flourishing than the pine in
spring.
Dim as the moon mantled in filmy clouds,
Restless as snow whirled by the driving wind.
Gaze far off from a distance,
She sparkles like the sun rising from morning

mists.

This excerpt is from the second paragraph of Cao Zhi's "Ode to the Goddess of Luo." It described the goddess of Luo's beautiful dress and interluded the scene of Zhen Huan dancing at a banquet, setting off Zhen's graceful face, dress, and performance. The original word is catchy, rhyming in many places, and the sentence pattern is relatively neat.

Formal System

As mentioned above, the formal system can be directly perceived, that is, the features of artistic works or aesthetic objects that can be sensed through visual, auditory, tactile, and other senses, mainly including the aesthetic representation at the sound, character, vocabulary and sentence. The author will discuss those aspects in detail.

1. Sound

Liu Miqing (2012) proposed that sound was a formal means to carry the aesthetic information of speech, which mainly included rhythm and rhyme. In the process of the English translation, the translator should pay attention to the rhythm and rhyme scheme of the original word. "韵" in Chinese "Ci" refers to the use of rhyme in works. The so-called "rhyme" refers to the use of the same vowel at the end of the lines of "Ci" and "Fu" to make the sound and rhyme harmonious. The rhyme of "Fu" can appear in a sentence or interlaced. While the rhyme of English and American poetry does not necessarily appeared at the end of the sentence. They are often alliteration, end rhyme, or abdominal rhyme according to the position of the finals in the word. Chinese "Ci" uses tonal tones to form a rhythm, while Western poetry uses the foot to express poetic rhythm, such as iambic, anapaestic, trochaic and dactylic. The rhyme of first, second, and fourth lines of the "Ode to the Goddess of Luo" were

¹ <https://peixun.transfu.com/article/17722.html>

[ong], and the fifth and sixth lines were [ue]. The English translation should keep the musicality as much as possible while following the genre. The alliteration [m], [s], [b] in the subtitle translation made the rhythm of the “Ci” more compact and orderly and enhanced the sense of rhythm of the whole “Ci.” When singing, alliteration could make it easy and strengthen the musicality. TT2 had only one use of alliteration at the phonetic level, which was less musical than the subtitle translation. Sound is not only a medium for conveying language information but also carries the aesthetic characteristics of language. Therefore, the English translation of episodes should pay attention to rhymes to make people sound beautiful and comfortable.

2. Character and Words

“Word” is the most crucial unit that can carry information in a language, which involves word selection and collocation. Liu also proposed the “ABC principle” (appropriateness, beauty, and compactness) that tested the beauty standard of words. “Appropriateness” referred to express the original meaning and adapted to the context. “Beauty” was a quality that gave people great pleasure physically and mentally. “Compactness” meant fine finger refining. The words in this passage are precise and easy to understand. The “lightly” and “gracefully” in TT1 showed the beauty of Zhen Huan’s dancing, and the movements were skilled, conforming to the “ABC principle.” In Chinese, “Ci” has two kinds of concepts. One is the expression, usually composed of two or more words with fixed collocation, to form a phrase. The other represents a literary genre and has strict rules in word count and tone. In English, “word” refers to vocabulary or phrase, and different parts of speech can represent different concepts, actions, or states. Words

constitute sentences and are the most basic unit for people to express their thoughts. The accuracy of vocabulary selection directly determines the clarity and effect of the information expressed, so the choice of vocabulary is essential. TT1 was more concise and easy to understand, which conformed to the “ABC principle” generally, but there seemed to be one problem. In Chinese, “鸿” refers to “大雁,” which are loyal birds of love and can also represent good luck and lofty ideals. In China, “goose” are poultry, although they have wings, but have lost the ability to fly in the sky. It did not match the image of Zhen Huan’s dancing, and the big goose was not graceful and clumsy. Translating “鸿” into “goose” was improper. “天鹅” translate into “swan,” and its body is slender. It belongs to a wild animal and can fly in the sky. “大雁” belongs to the “swan class.” In addition, the “swan” in Western countries represents pure things and is consistent with morals. TT2’s translation of “惊鸿” into “startled swan” could accurately express the meaning of the sentence and also give the Western viewers a beautiful feeling.

3. Sentence

The beauty of sentences and paragraphs has three aspects. First, using “syntactic deviation” and grammatical fuzziness to produce beauty. Second, the use of “frequency,” that is the frequent occurrence of regular sentence patterns, and the repetition of this form to create beauty. Third, using “pragmatic and functional sentence arrangement” to carry aesthetic information in a given context and compose aesthetic feeling by using formal wholeness and harmony. TT1 mainly embodied the second point, using repeated sentence patterns to bring beauty. The first four sentences were four-character word groups, and the translation used parallel sentences. The first six sentences of the subtitle translation were symmetrical in form, giving people

a beautiful feeling. And the words in each sentence were similar, neat, and consistent with the original text. TT2 was better in sentence pattern, mainly reflecting the second and third points. The first six lines were parallel sentences, and every two lines changed sentence patterns, the whole looked well-ordered. Although the first, second, fifth, and sixth sentences were both similes, they used the two symbol words "like" and "as," which were varied and made people feel the beauty of sentence pattern changes directly. However, the TT2 translation was not as tidy as TT1. The repetition of parallel sentences and the change of sentence patterns could increase the sense of rhythm of sentences and made the language more rhythmical. It could also attract the attention of the viewers and enhanced the appeal of the expression.

Non-formal System

Although the aesthetic of immaterial form does not exist in the formal structure of concrete matter, it cannot be separated from the "total existence" of sound, rhyme, word, sentence, and chapter. The components of non-formal system are uncertain, non-quantitative, unlimited systems with fuzziness and uncertainty. The author mainly discusses the two aspects of emotion and image. This feature requires the translator to have an overall grasp when choosing words to avoid inadequate emotional transmission or lack of cultural connotation.

1. Emotion

It is necessary to grasp the author's emotion of the source language and determine the overall style of the translation. This section mainly described the beautiful posture of Zhen Huan, and the relationship between Zhen and the emperor was heating up, and the emotion was pure. Therefore, the choice of words should be more cheerful. The adjectives "soaring," "glorious," "majestic," "mantled," "swirling," and

"rising" in the subtitle translation all expressed strong feelings or emotions. They added vividness to the description. They were also often used to describe a visual sight or landscape with a certain poetic flavour or literary sense. The choice of words in TT2 was relatively common and plain, which cannot convey strong feelings.

2. Image

An image is an object that gives a certain feeling to the author of the source language. It evokes perceptual and emotional responses of the viewers and creates vivid and profound images. Choosing this section as an episode showed the author's high praise for Zhen Huan and portrayed her graceful dancing and posture. "Loyal wild swan," "auspicious dragons," "noble chrysanthemums," and "tough and tensile pine trees" were all beautiful symbols in Chinese culture, representing the author's praise for the protagonist, and it also showed the fabulous love. In addition, using the hazy beauty of "moon" and the purity of "snow," the film created a beautiful atmosphere and showed the elegant image of the dancers. Different individuals faced with the same things will have different subjective feelings. These ordinary things, "started swan," "dragon," "chrysanthemum," "pine," "moon," and "snow" were endowed with beautiful meanings by the author, bringing beautiful feelings to people and making the portrayal of Zhen Huan's dancing style more diversified.

Example 2 Buddhist Dancers

ST:

小山重叠金明灭，
鬓云欲度香腮雪。
懒起画蛾眉，
弄妆梳洗迟。
照花前后镜，

花面交相映。
新帖绣罗襦，
双双金鸂鶒。

TT1:

Light and shade upon her bed screen's peaks,
Her hair drifts cloud-like across rosy cheeks.

Idly she rises to paint her brows,

Dallying with her makeup and hair.

Admiring herself front and back in the mirror,

Her face rivals blossoms in beauty.

Embroidered on the silken vest she wears,

Golden partridges fly in pairs.

(Subtitle Translation)

TT2:

Dwarfish mountains, fold on fold,

Embers of day's dying gold.

Cloudy tresses softly lean

On spicy cheeks of snowy sheen;

While languid still she doth recline

To paint her moth-like eyebrows fine;

Then idly with her trinkets plays,

And to adorn herself delays.

Through inverted glass she peeps

Where in her hair a blossom sleeps,

While blossom fair and countenance

Do each the other's grace enhance.

Her new silk gown, embroidered rare,

Shows golden cuckoos pair.

(杨宪益，戴乃迭译)

This work comes from Wen Tingyun's "Buddhist Dancers," which described a scene of a woman getting up lazily and dressing up. Although

the main character had a beautiful face after makeup and worn gorgeous clothes, she was lonely. This episode occurred when Zhen Huan cried after Shen Meizhuang (Zhen's best friend) died because of dystocia.

Formal System

1. Sound

"Ci" generally rhymes with lines, every two lines with a rhyme, the original "Ci" with "aabbccdd" rhyme scheme. Its alternate tonal tones and slow rhythm created a low atmosphere. The English translation of "Ci" should pay attention to the rhyme and meter of the source language, Yang Xianyi and Gladys Yang's translation (hereinafter referred to Yang's translation) fully took this request into account, the rhyme scheme was "aabbccddeeffgg" at the end of the sentence (it is also known as end rhyme). Its form was neat and the sentence was short, which in line with the rhyme of Chinese "Ci". The only shortcoming was that Yang translated the one sentence into two lines in English, although the original meaning was fully retained, the number of sentences was a little large, and not suitable for appearing in the subtitles. While the rhyming "aabbccdbb" in the subtitle translation did not achieve a complete and formal correspondence, it achieved the same singing effect, made up for the translation difficulties caused by cultural differences, and made the translation musical.

2. Word

In terms of word choice, Yang's translation were superior, "dying," "softly," "languid," and "idly" vividly depicted the woman's lazy and unintentionally dressed up after her lover leaves, implied the woman's lonely mood, and also illustrated Zhen's sadness at the loss of her best friend, strengthening the heaviness of the article.

However, there were only two expressions in the subtitle translation, which was not deep enough to describe the characters. It is worth noting “partridge” is a kind of bird and is often used as medicine. It is different from cuckoo. However, translating “鸚鵡” into “Golden Cuckoos” in Yang’s translation remained to be discussed. The author thinks that the translation does not conform to the “ABC principle.” As far as word choice is concerned, the subtitled translation “partridges” is more accurate.

3. Sentence

Subtitle translation used gerund juxtaposition, making translation compact and fast-tempoed. The last sentence of the subtitle translation used a syntactic variation to carry aesthetic information. It utilized set-off by contrast to show the protagonist’s loneliness. Li Yunxing (2001) pointed out the limitations of time and space in subtitle translation. English translation of this sentence was relatively concise, which enhanced the sense of rhythm of the translation and improved the artistic effect of films.

Non-formal Systems

The whole “Ci” had only one image, that was “partridge,” the tone was slow. In Chinese culture, the “partridge” was often used in poetry to symbolize sorrow and longing, implying separation. This episode showed Zhen Huan’s heartbreaking emotions and intense loneliness and foreshadowed resentment toward An Lingrong after losing her best friend. In Western culture, the “partridge” was common and had no specific symbolic meaning. Given this, the subtitle translation avoided using passionate and cheerful words based on retaining the partridge’s image, which symbolized sorrow. The words like “idly” and “dally” fully retained the sad tone of the original words, showing Zhen Huan’s loneliness and sadness. TT2 also adopted relatively negative words such as “dying,” “languid,” and

“idly” to echo the parting and sorrow symbolized by “partridge,” which corresponded with the content of the plot, enabling foreign viewers to empathize with the situation, understand the plot and the beauty of the original words.

IV. CONCLUSION

Through the above comparison and analysis, we find that no matter in Example 1 or Example 2, the translation cannot match the sentence pattern and neatness of the original text, nor can it reproduce the phonological characteristics of the original text, which is a common problem in interlingual translation. However, translation and aesthetics has given new thinking and concrete standards to the English translation of Chinese classical “Ci” and “Fu.” In the form system, the translator should pay more attention to the use of alliteration, end rhyme, and parallel sentence patterns to enhance the artistic sense of the works. At the same time, the choice of words should follow the “ABC principle” and give people the enjoyment of beauty as much as possible based on accurate translation. In the non-formal system, it is necessary to retain the image of the original text and show the emotion of the author, and on this basis, choose words that conform to its symbolic meaning to echo the tone of the original text.

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